Flexible Hippocampal Representation of Abstract Boundaries Supports Memory-guided Choice

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Abstract

Cognitive maps represent the location of different spatial cues relative to environmental boundaries. Map-like neural representations in the hippocampus are particularly sensitive to boundary changes, which highlights how cognitive maps can facilitate flexible learning in dynamically changing environments. Notably, cognitive maps in the hippocampus and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) also represent abstract knowledge. Yet it's unclear whether map-like knowledge representations in these regions are sensitive to boundary changes in abstract spaces. Here, we use a memory-guided decision-making task to test whether the human hippocampus and mPFC flexibly learn abstract boundary changes in distinct two-dimensional(2D) decision spaces. Despite being unnecessary to accurately perform the task, participants conserve a 2D map-like representation of abstract boundaries after the task, where the precision of their representation relates to prior choice accuracy. Additionally, we find that mPFC and hippocampus represent the euclidean distance to the relevant boundary during decision-making. Testing whether there are brain regions sensitive to changes to the limits of the decision space, we observe flexible hippocampal representation of abstract boundaries that relates to choice accuracy. Taken together, these results highlight the importance of hippocampal boundary representations in facilitating flexible knowledge retrieval across diverse spatial and abstract contexts.

Keywords: cognitive maps; learning; memory; hippocampus

Introduction

Environmental boundary representations are known to exert a notable influence on spatial cognition across species (Poulter, Hartley, & Lever, 2018). In particular, the hippocampal formation dynamically adapts to represent the geometrical features of the space, which facilitates flexible contextual processing (Lever, Burton, Jeewajee, O'Keefe, & Burgess, 2009; Wills, Lever, Cacucci, Burgess, & O'Keefe, 2005; Behrens et al., 2018) in the service of spatial memory formation (Bellmund et al., 2020; Julian & Doeller, 2021; Steemers et al., 2016). Notably, hippocampal cognitive maps are thought to extend more generally storing to non-spatial forms of episodic memory (O'Keefe & Dostrovsky, 1971), putatively serving as a format for flexibly representing abstract knowledge ((Schiller et al., 2015; Kaplan, Schuck, & Doeller, 2017; Whittington, McCaffary, Bakermans, & Behrens, 2022) The putative importance of cognitive maps in flexibly coding abstract knowledge raises the possibility that abstract boundaries guide map-like learning of abstract knowledge.

Addressing whether abstract boundaries during learning are processed by the human hippocampal-prefrontal circuit in a similar way as physical borders, we developed a two alternative forced-choice(2AFC) fMRI task where participants made similarity judgements on either price or freshness levels of various fruits and vegetables (Figure 1A). Unbeknownst to participants, the continuous price and freshness levels for each produce good formed two-dimensional(2D) abstract spaces, with four of the goods placed at the extreme coordinates(boundary goods), one good fixed near the center(landmark good), and sixteen cued goods that were located within the boundaries. In the 2AFC, participants saw a produce good and decided whether it was more similar in price or freshness to either the landmark good or the most proximal boundary good(in 2D Euclidean distance). Crucially, the boundary produce goods had two distinct sets of coordinates depending on which run they were featured, where each run was defined by one of two distinct abstract spaces(square shape and distorted shape). In contrast, the landmark coordinates were consistent in the two spaces(Figure 1A, bottom left).
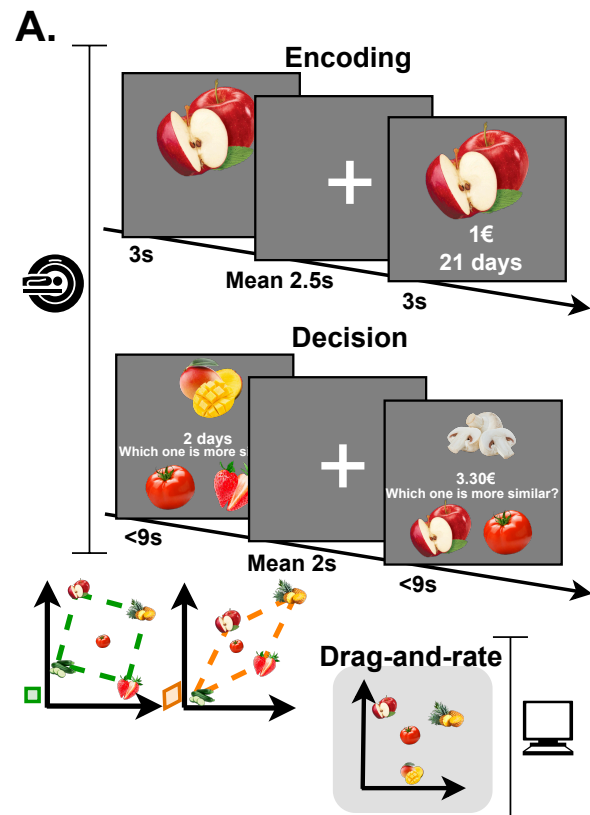

Figure 1: A. Encoding phase: Encoding of boundary and landmark goods attributes. Decision phase: In a two alternative forced-choice task, participants needed to choose whether a given good is "more similar" in price or freshness to a boundary or to the landmark good. Bottom Left: Coordinates of boundary goods in the two abstract spaces forming square and distorted shapes. Bottom Right: Post-task drag-and-rate. Participants were presented with a blank map and asked to place the goods seen during the task according to the position they most strongly associated with that particular good.
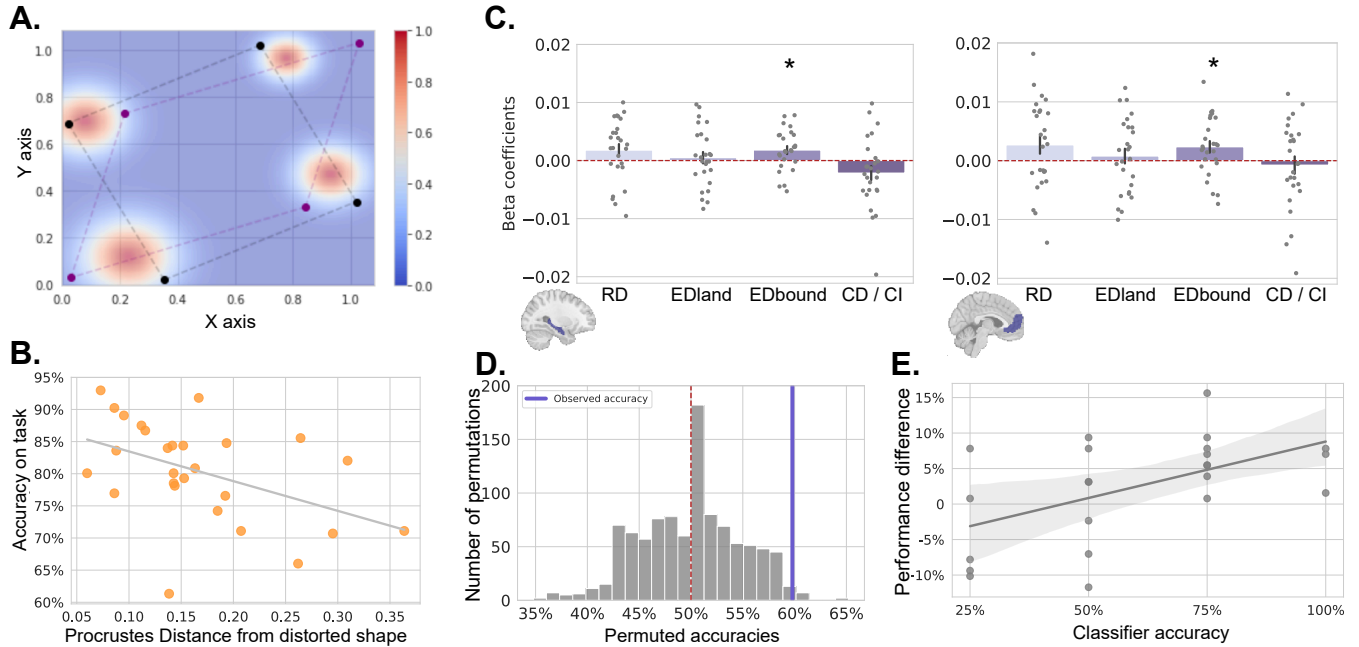
Figure 2: A. Participants' average placement of boundary goods in the drag-and-rate. B. Correlation between choice accuracy and drag-and-rate task precision. Plot displays correlation between procrustes distance of 29 participants' reconstruction from the original distorted shape with overall accuracy on task. C. Beta coefficients of RSA GLM in hippocampus and mPFC. The bar plots show beta coefficients resulting from the GLM for each predictor; every participant is an individual dot. Error bars represent SEM. Left: Significant bilateral hippocampal effect of euclidean distance to the closest boundary; Right: Significant mPFC effect of euclidean distance to the closest boundary. D. Hippocampal classifier results after one thousand permutations with mean accuracy 50% (chance level, indicated by red dashed line). Bold purple line indicates observed hippocampal classifier accuracy. E. Correlation between difference in task performance and hippocampal classifier accuracy. Positive differences indicate higher performance in distorted versus square shape. Asterisks showing significant differences: *= p< .05.

Results

Using the drag-and-rate task after scanning, we tested whether participants retained a 2D representation of one of the decision spaces. Participants consistently organized boundary goods in the correct order(each boundary good shared a side with its neighboring boundary good), surpassing chance expectations(p< .001). Conducting a Monte Carlo simulation to determine the likelihood of all cued goods falling within the shapes, we found that they were positioned within the boundaries of the abstract space significantly above chance level(p< .001). This outcome highlights that the boundaries delimited the placement of observed products within the abstract space. Moreover, post-task fMRI debriefing indicated that none of the participants were aware that the goods formed any kind of 2D space. Next, we asked whether the precision during the placement was related to their performance during the 2AFC. We then correlated the Procrustes distance from each original space with performance on task, and found when participants better reconstructed the original distorted shape, they consequently achieved greater task performance (ρ=-0.42, p=.026). However, this relationship was not found when participants needed to reconstruct the square

shape (ρ=-0.077, p=.70). We investigated whether the similarity of neural representations of the goods in the abstract spaces were modulated by the 2D Euclidean distance to the landmark good and the most proximal boundary good. We observed a significant effect of 2D Euclidean distance to the closest boundary in our bilateral hippocampus ($t(25)$=2.60, p=.015) and mPFC masks($t(25)$=2.39, p=.024), suggesting that sharing similar Euclidean distance from the boundary is a significant predictor of neural similarity across products. Conversely, we didn't observe any significant effect of Euclidean distance of the products to the landmark good in mPFC($t(25)$ = 0.62, p=0.54) or the hippocampus($t(25)$= 0.50, p=.62).

Asking whether the hippocampus and mPFC flexibly represented abstract spaces consisting of the same goods with different boundary coordinates(price and freshness values), we tested whether boundary-defined contextual identity(the shape of abstract spaces) was decodable from hippocampal and mPFC signals. We conducted multivariate pattern analysis(MVPA) on encoding phase boundary good trials to test whether the patterns elicited during encoding trials in the square shape were distinguishable from trials in the distorted shape(i.e., same visual stimuli in both abstract spaces).

We used a linear support vector machine(SVM), and applied a leave-one-subject-out cross-validation procedure to test whether the classifier could decode the shape of the abstract space above chance. In other words, we used hippocampal and mPFC fMRI data to classify whether an encoding trial for a boundary good belonged to a run that was either in a square or distorted shaped context. The classifier yielded significant results in the hippocampus($p=.02$, accuracy:60%), but not in the mPFC($p=.29$, accuracy:53%). We tested the abstract shape classifier on the landmark good trials and observed no significant effect in the hippocampus($p=.47$, accuracy:51%), suggesting that the hippocampal classification effect was specific to the representation of boundary goods. Classifier accuracy didn't correlate with general task performance($\rho=0.22$, p-value=.30). Relating the difference in task performance in the distorted versus square shape to the hippocampal classifier bias, we observed a significant correlation with classifier accuracy($\rho=0.47$, p-value=.022). This result means that the classifier accuracy was highest in the hippocampus for participants that performed better in the distorted shape compared to the square shape. We provide evidence that the human hippocampus flexibly represents abstract boundaries related to everyday knowledge during memory retrieval and that this process supports memory-guided choice behavior.

Conclusions

We provide evidence that the human hippocampus flexibly represents abstract boundaries related to everyday knowledge during memory retrieval and that this process supports memory-guided choice behavior. Moreover, this map-like representation of boundaries in a 2D abstract cognitive space during memory-guided decisions still occurs when it isn't necessary to effectively make a decision. Consequently, our data provide important clues on how the hippocampus can guide decision making across diverse spatial and abstract contexts.

Acknowledgments

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