Comparison of Frontal Alpha Asymmetry Among Schizophrenia Patients, Major Depressive Disorder, and Healthy Controls

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Abstract

Background

Electroencephalography (EEG) frontal alpha asymmetry (FAA) has been observed in several psychiatric disorders. However, dominance in left or right frontal alpha activity remains inconsistent in patients with major depressive disorder (MDD), patients with schizophrenia, and healthy controls. This study compared FAA among patients with MDD, schizophrenia, and healthy control.

Methods

We recruited 20 patients with MDD, 18 patients with schizophrenia, and 16 healthy individuals. The EEG alpha frequency ranged from 8.0 to 12.0 Hz. FAA was expressed as the difference between absolute power values in both the right and left electrodes in the alpha frequency range (common-log-transformed F4–F3 and F8–F7). Hamilton depression and anxiety rating scales were evaluated in patients with MDD. Positive and negative syndrome scales were evaluated in patients with schizophrenia.

Results

Patients with schizophrenia showed significantly lower left frontal lobe activity than healthy controls (FAA, schizophrenia vs. healthy: -0.10 ± 0.05 vs. -0.05 ± 0.05). There were no significant differences in FAA between patients with schizophrenia and MDD as well as between patients with MDD and healthy controls.

Conclusions

The present study suggests that frontal alpha asymmetry indicates a breaking neural activity in schizophrenia. Breaking rhythmic activity as a left-lateralized FAA can be a neuropathological attribute in patients with schizophrenia but lack of sample size and information such as medication and duration of illness, all of which could make it difficult generalize finding.

Background

Although electroencephalographic frontal alpha asymmetry (FAA) has been suggested to be a clinical biomarker for the abnormal behavioral phenotype of major depressive disorder (MDD) [1–9], conflicting results in prior research have contested this view [10, 11]. A previous meta-analysis of 1,883 individuals with MDD and 2,161 controls found that FAA's diagnostic value was not significant [11]. Whereas, hemispheric lateralization of brain activity could reflect a potential risk underlying to neurophysiological attribute in psychiatric disorders such as MDD [12] and schizophrenia [13]. As a model to understand physiologic state, FAA could help to expand our knowledge for schizophrenia and MDD.

Neurobiological abnormalities in depression have been linked to uncontrollable avoidant behavior [14]. The core feature of depressive symptoms is a change in affect that influences coping strategies in response to daily life events [15–18]. The approach-withdrawal hypothesis offers one model of such a coping strategy, categorizing an emotional response to an external event in terms of the subsequent actions [19, 20]. It has been hypothesized for two motivational behaviors in response to stimuli [21, 22]: seeking and avoidance. These two behavior systems reflect distinct frontal hemispheric activity [23–26]: left frontal activation could be considered as an approach system paired with a positive emotion, while right frontal activation could indicate a withdrawal system involving negative emotion [24, 27]. Compared to resting-state right frontal alpha power measured via electroencephalography (EEG), reduced left frontal alpha power reflects an increase in left frontal activity [28].

The aforementioned behavioral withdrawal systems have also explained to character of behavior in schizophrenia, which indicates collateral forms of motivational impairment, such as anhedonia and avolition [29]. Individuals with schizophrenia also exhibit higher left alpha power than right alpha power [30], and these measurements were significantly different from those recorded in healthy controls [10]. In the above study, subjects with schizophrenia exhibited a tendency toward left lateralized alpha power compared to those with MDD, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and conduct disorder, while those with MDD exhibited a tendency toward right lateralized alpha power. However, A meta-analysis study investigating FAA also has inconsistent findings [11]. Furthermore, studies comparing subjects with MDD to those with other psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia, are scarce. In neurophysiologic view of approach and withdrawal system, lateralization of brain activity could underlie pathologic state between patients with MDD and schizophrenia. This study sought to explain these inconsistencies in the literature by comparing frontal alpha asymmetry between MDD patients, schizophrenia patients, and healthy controls.

The present study hypothesized that significant differences in FAA would be found between MDD patients, schizophrenia patients, and healthy controls. In addition, we hypothesized that patients with schizophrenia would show left-lateralized FAA compared to patients with MDD and healthy individuals.

Methods

Participants

This study recruited 20 patients with MDD (11 women), 18 patients with schizophrenia (9 women), and 16 healthy controls (8 women). All participants were native Koreans. Inclusion criteria of all participants were as follows: (1) age ranged 19 to 65 years; (2) in case of patients, met the requirements of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition* (DSM-4); (3) normal vision or hearing. Participants and patients with (1) vision or hearing problems, (2) drug and/or alcohol abuse, (3) traumatic brain injury, and (3) a lifetime history of neurological disorders were excluded. Furthermore, healthy subjects with a lifetime history of psychiatric disorders were excluded. Patients and healthy individuals were diagnosed based on the Structured Clinical Interview using the MINI International

Neuropsychiatric Interview in the DSM-4. The MINI, a clinician-administered structured interview, was designed to measure anxiety, mood, eating, substance use, and psychotic disorders. According to DSM-4 criteria, and patients with MDD and schizophrenia were diagnosed. Clinical symptoms were evaluated by a trained psychiatrist. Hamilton Depression and Anxiety [31, 32] rating scales were evaluated in patients with MDD. Positive and Negative Syndrome Scales [33]were evaluated in patients with schizophrenia. Healthy participants were recruited through public advertising in Seoul, Korea. The mean (± SD) age of all participants was 37.63 ± 11.38 years (range, 19–59 years). The present study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea (approval number KC14DDSE0479). All participants provided written informed consent. All experimental procedures followed relevant institutional guidelines and regulations.

Electrophysiological Measurement And Analysis

Participants were seated in a comfortable chair in a sound-attenuated room. EEG data were recorded using an amplifier (NeuroScan SynAmps Compumedics USA, El Paso, TX, USA) with a headcap equipped with AgCl electrodes according to the international 10–20 system. We used a EEG device that records from 62 scalp positions—15 standard channels (FP1, FP2, F7, F3, FZ, F4, F8, C3, CZ, C4, P3, PZ, P4, O1, and O2) and 47 extended channels (FPZ, AF3, AF4, F5, F1, F2, F6, FT7, FC5, FC3, FC1, FCZ, FC2, FC4, FC6, FT8, T7, C5, C1, C2, C6, T8, TP7, CP5, CP3, CP1, CPZ, CP2, CP4, CP6, TP8, P7, P5, P1, P2, P6, P8, PO7, PO5, PO3, POZ, PO4, PO6, PO8, CB1, OZ, and CB2). Additional electrodes were placed above and below the left eye for vertical electro-oculography (VEO) and at the outer canthus of each eye for horizontal electro-oculography. EEG data were recorded using a 0.1–100 Hz bandpass filter at a sampling rate of 1,000 Hz. The signals were referenced to both mastoids, and the ground electrode was placed on the forehead. The impedance between the electrodes and the scalp was maintained below 5 kΩ during the entire recording session. Subsequently, the EEG data were preprocessed using Scan 4.5 software, Curry 7.0 (Compumedics USA, El Paso, TX, USA). Gross artifacts were rejected through visual inspection of the recording by a trained individual who had no previous information regarding the data origin.

Resting State Eeg Paradigm And Alpha Asymmetry Calculation

Resting EEG was recorded with eyes open and closed for 5 min each. Eye blinking artifacts can have an undesirable effect on EEG band power, and therefore were corrected using established mathematical procedures [34, 35]. Additionally, based on VEO, positive and negative components exceeding 300 μV from before and after a maximum peak of blinking interval (-100 ms to 300 ms) in the frontal regions were considered covariant. Data were re-analyzed using Matlab 2016 software (Mathworks, Inc, Natick, MA, USA), including a fast Fourier transform with a 1–50 Hz bandpass filter to calculate the absolute power: delta (1.0 to 4.0 Hz), theta (4.0 to 8.0 Hz), alpha (8.0 to 12.0 Hz), beta (12.0 to 30.0 Hz), and

gamma (30.0 to 50.0 Hz) signals. The power values were displayed as averaged points in the frequency range. Artifacts exceeding ± 100 μV were rejected at all electrode sites. For each participant, 30 randomized artifact-free epochs (epoch length 2.048 s) were used in the analysis. The F4 and F3 electrodes covered the middle-frontal scalp region, while the F8 and F7 electrodes covered the lateral-frontal scalp areas, both of which are associated with frontal alpha asymmetry for depressive disorder (Fig. 1-a) [11]. To normalize the FAA data, a common log transformation was applied to the power values of selected electrodes [36]. FAA has been defined as hemispheric differences [37], which were calculated as the difference between selected electrodes, right frontal alpha power, and left frontal alpha power.

FAA = "log_{10} F4 - log_{10} F3" and "log_{10} F8 - log_{10} F7"

Statistical analysis

Demographic statistics with age and sex between participant groups were tested using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-squared tests. A comparison of alpha asymmetry was performed using multivariate analysis of covariance. Within-subject factors included alpha asymmetry values (log-transformed F4–F3 and F8–F7) with eyes open and closed. The groups constituted the between-subject factors. Age and sex were considered as covariates. Partial correlations between alpha asymmetry and clinical symptoms were analyzed to account age and sex. Bootstrapping tests were performed in the correlation analysis, and the sampling number was 10,000, which has been accepted in previous studies [38–40]. Alpha asymmetry between men and women was compared and analyzed using ANOVA. p-values were corrected using the Bonferroni method, which is applied to multiple comparisons of several experimental conditions and variables [41, 42].

Results

The mean age of the MDD, schizophrenia, and healthy control groups was 42.60 ± 11.48, 32.00 ± 10.45, and 37.75 ± 9.78 years, respectively. Descriptive characteristics of study participants are summarized in Table 1. The group difference in age was significant between patients with MDD and those with schizophrenia ($f = 4.68$, $p = 0.014$).

Table 1
Descriptive characteristics of the study participants

Variable	MDD (a) (n = 20)	Schizophrenia (b) (n = 18)	Control (c) (n = 16)	Statistics
Age (years)	42.60 ± 11.48	32.00 ± 10.45	37.75 ± 9.78	$f = 4.68$; $p = 0.014$; a > b
Sex (male/female), n/n	9/11	9/9	8/8	$\chi^2 = 0.13$, $p = 0.939$
HAM-D	23.70 ± 4.86	–	–	–
HAM-A	20.45 ± 7.39	–	–	–
PANSS-Positive	–	30.33 ± 5.34	–	–
PANSS-Negative	–	17.67 ± 6.05	–	–
PANSS-General	–	52.78 ± 8.62	–	–
Data presented as mean ± SD unless otherwise indicated.				
Acronyms: MDD, Major depressive disorder; HAM-D, Hamilton-Depression scale; HAM-A, Hamilton Anxiety scale; PANSS, Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale.				

An interaction effect, accounting for age and sex, was not significant between group and FAA ($f = 1.30$, $p = 0.253$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.100$). However, for between-subjects effects (schizophrenia *vs.* healthy control), we observed a significant difference in F4–F3 with the eyes-open condition ($f_{[2, 49]} = 3.70$, $p = 0.032$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.131$). Alpha asymmetry in the schizophrenia group was lower than that in the healthy controls (-0.10 ± 0.04 *vs.* -0.05 ± 0.05, corrected $p = 0.027$, 95% CI = 0.01 to 0.10) (Fig. 1-b and Table 2). There were no significant differences in F4–F3 with eyes open between patients with MDD and healthy controls (corrected $p = 0.630$, 95% CI = -0.02 to 0.07), or between MDD and schizophrenia patients (corrected $p = 0.434$, 95% CI = -0.02 to 0.08). There were no significant differences found in F4–F3 with eyes-closed ($f_{[2, 49]} = 0.64$, $p = 0.532$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.025$), or in F8–F7 with eyes-open or -closed ($f_{[2, 49]} = 0.96$, $p = 0.391$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.038$; $f_{[2, 49]} = 0.11$, $p = 0.896$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$). In correlation analysis, there were no associations between alpha asymmetry and clinical symptoms (depression and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.29$, $p = 0.246$; anxiety and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.22$, $p = 0.375$; schizophrenia-positive and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.16$, $p = 0.567$, schizophrenia-negative and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.05$, $p = 0.852$; schizophrenia-general and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.26$, $p = 0.330$; schizophrenia-total and F4–F3 eyes-open, $r = -0.29$, $p = 0.277$).

Table 2
FAA value of participant's group

FAA	MDD	Schizophrenia	Control
Eyes-open			
F4-F3	-0.08 ± 0.05	-0.10 ± 0.04	-0.05 ± 0.05
F8-F7	-0.22 ± 0.12	-0.27 ± 0.12	-0.27 ± 0.13
Eyes-closed			
F4-F3	-0.03 ± 0.04	-0.02 ± 0.03	-0.01 ± 0.03
F8-F7	-0.07 ± 0.07	-0.06 ± 0.07	-0.07 ± 0.08
Data presented as mean ± SD unless otherwise indicated.			
Acronyms: FAA, Frontal alpha asymmetry; MDD, Major depressive disorder.			

Discussion

The present study quantitatively compared electroencephalographic FAA among MDD patients, schizophrenia patients, and healthy controls. Our results indicated that patients with schizophrenia exhibited lower alpha asymmetry than healthy participants, and this difference was significant when alpha asymmetry recordings were conducted under eyes-open conditions. Our findings concerning patients with schizophrenia are supported by a previous study, which showed that patients with schizophrenia had reduced alpha asymmetry of functional connectivity than controls [43].

Although the design of the present study focused on the identification of between-subjects effects, none were found between MDD patients and healthy controls, or between MDD and schizophrenia patients. This lack of significance may be attributed to small sample numbers, which make it difficult to generalize the results. Potential limitations of our small sample size were revealed by statistical analysis and data processing as well as lack of information such as duration of illness and pharmacological history and these should be taken into consideration when interpreting the present findings. There were no associations between FAA and clinical symptoms, that should be also regarded on interpretation of finding. Withdrawal motivation in patients with depression and schizophrenia is closely related to relative increases in right frontal brain activation or relative decreases in right alpha activity [30, 44]. However, the present study showed an absence of measurement in withdrawal and avoidance behavior that should be taken into consideration. The balance of interhemispheric activity may play a role in maintaining mental health across the neurodevelopment of schizophrenia [45], and our study findings partially support this hypothesis. Schizophrenic patients have been shown to exhibit more breaking of rhythmic activity as part of left alpha dominance, compared to healthy participants. Previous studies have also reported that patients with schizophrenia exhibit hyperactivation at high-frequency alpha network in the left frontal area during working memory tasks [46]. Additionally, our findings concerning alpha asymmetry have

implications for high stability in alpha asymmetry that was recorded when the patient's eyes were open was a more useful predictor of disease specificity than data gathered under eyes-closed conditions [47], while eyes-open condition includes blinking noise which should be carefully handled in preprocessing with artifact removal. Furthermore, the present study showed a significant effect during eyes-open conditions. In our finding, variation of FAA scores with eyes-open was larger than eyes-closed as well as eyes-closed alpha activity can lead to reduced baseline levels of brain activity compared to eyes-open activity [48]. Alpha asymmetry in the mid-frontal area is commonly observed in patients with psychiatric disorders [21, 30]. In addition, metabolic and structural alterations in the mid-frontal region are thought to be dominant in patients with schizophrenia [49]. Future studies should determine the association between cognitive deficits and alpha asymmetry in schizophrenia patients.

The present study was subject to several limitations: we lacked patient information regarding medication, the age at onset of the disorder, handedness, behavioral assessment, and level of (formal) education. All these factors could have affected FAA and, therefore, could have influenced our results. In addition, our sample size was insufficient to generalize our findings. This study also had an absence of consistent assessment in clinical symptoms and withdrawal/avoidance behavior. Future studies should use clinical scales that consistently evaluate withdrawal/avoidance in all participants groups. Although we suspect that a cross-sectional study may replicate some of our clinical findings, a longitudinal study that investigates alpha asymmetry in a larger cohort would help to verify and expand upon our findings.

Conclusion

FAA may be a useful neurophysiological biomarker to distinguish between patients with schizophrenia and healthy individuals. Although our findings may have been underpowered as a result of small sample size, our present findings suggest that neurobiological abnormalities in FAA are remarkably presented a left lateralized alpha activity in patients with schizophrenia.

Abbreviations

ANOVA
analysis of variance; EEG:electroencephalography; FAA:frontal alpha asymmetry; MDD:major depressive disorder; VEO:vertical electro-oculography

Declarations

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea (approval number KC14DDSE0479). Informed consent was signed by all participants.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Author contributions

K-IJ contributed to the study design, data acquisition, analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. CL contributed to reviewing and correcting the manuscript and language editing. SL contributed to data interpretation and drafting of the manuscript. SH contributed to data acquisition and analysis. J-HC contributed to study design, completion of the manuscript, and supervision of the report. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Availability of data and materials

Data supporting our findings are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures

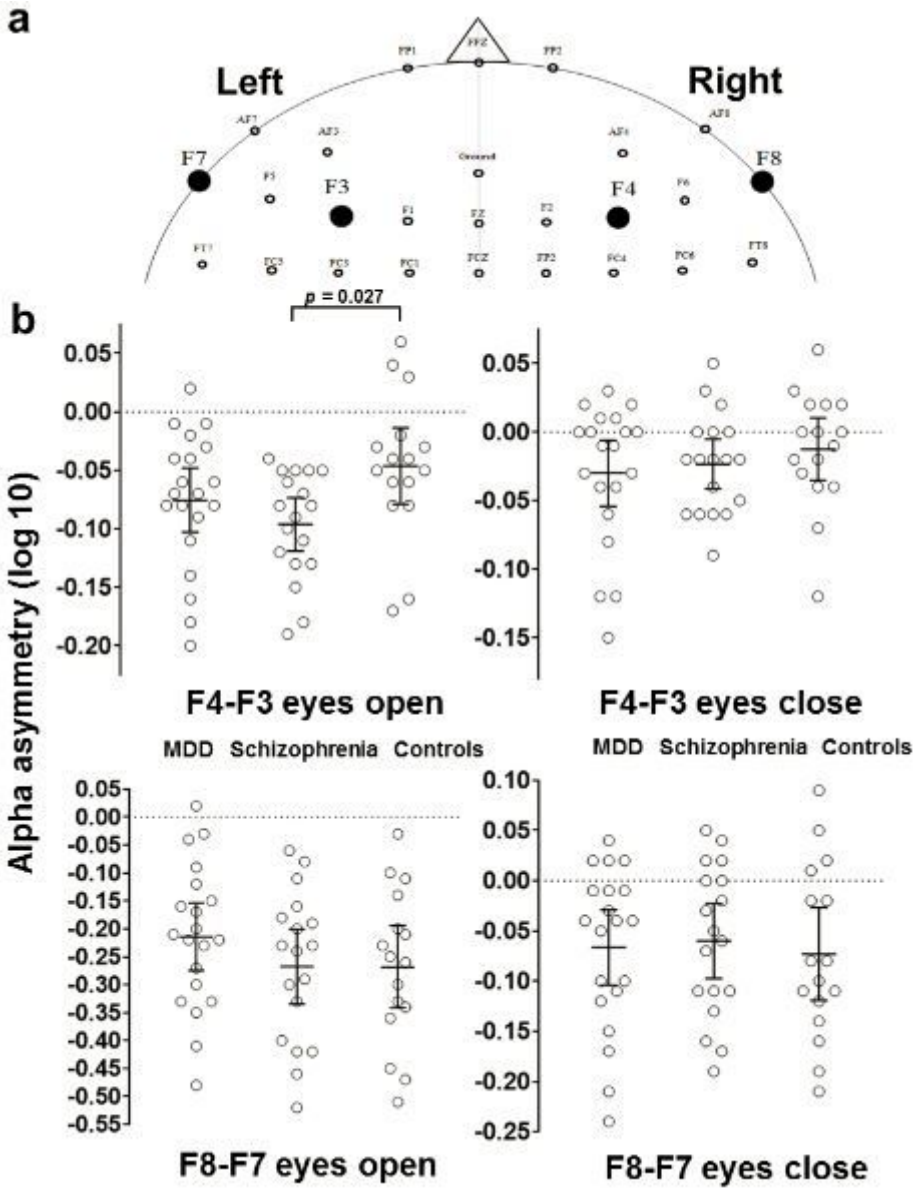

Figure 1

Comparison of alpha asymmetry among MDD patients, schizophrenia patients, and healthy controls. 1-a shows frontal electrodes sites; highlighted electrodes were used for the calculation of asymmetry. 1-b shows a comparison of alpha asymmetries observed across comparisons. Black error bars indicate standard error.