ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Previous studies have reported associations between attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms and DNA methylation in children. We report the first epigenome-wide association study meta-analysis of adult attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms, based on peripheral blood DNA methylation (Infinium HumanMethylation450K array) in three population-based adult cohorts.

METHODS: An epigenome-wide association study was performed in the Netherlands Twin Register (N = 2258, mean age 37 years), Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (N = 800, age 38 years), and Environmental Risk Longitudinal Twin Study (N = 1631, age 18 years), and results were combined through meta-analysis (total sample size N = 4689). Region-based analyses accounting for the correlation between nearby methylation sites were also performed.

RESULTS: One epigenome-wide significant differentially methylated position was detected in the Dunedin study, but meta-analysis did not detect differentially methylated positions that were robustly associated across cohorts. In region-based analyses, six significant differentially methylation regions (DMRs) were identified in the Netherlands Twin Register, 19 in the Dunedin study, and none in the Environmental Risk Longitudinal Twin Study. Of these DMRs, 92% were associated with methylation quantitative trait loci, and 68% showed moderate to large blood-brain correlations for DNA methylation levels. DMRs included six nonoverlapping DMRs (three in the Netherlands Twin Register, three in the Dunedin study) in the major histocompatibility complex, which were associated with expression of genes in the major histocompatibility complex, including C4A and C4B, previously implicated in schizophrenia.

CONCLUSIONS: Our findings point at new candidate loci involved in immune and neuronal functions that await further replication. Our work also illustrates the need for further research to examine to what extent epigenetic associations with psychiatric traits depend on characteristics such as age, comorbidities, exposures, and genetic background.

Keywords: ADHD, CAARS, DNA methylation, Epigenetic, EWAS, Meta-analysis

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.02.016

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is among the top-ranking psychiatric diagnoses in children and adults (1) and appears to reflect the extreme end of a continuous distribution of ADHD symptoms in the population (2–4). Genetic association studies have identified common and rare variants associated with ADHD (4–6). Numerous environmental risk factors have been reported, including prenatal and perinatal factors (7) [birth weight (8), prenatal exposure to maternal smoking (9), toxins (7), maternal fever and infections (10)] and postnatal factors [childhood maltreatment (11), current stress (11), infections (12)]. Recent studies have investigated if DNA methylation levels, which regulate gene expression, are associated with ADHD (13–25). DNA methylation may represent a marker that captures the cumulative effects of genetic variants, stochastic effects, and environmental exposures (26, 27) associated with a trait. Several prenatal exposures, including maternal famine (28), maternal folate (29), and maternal smoking (30), and later life exposures, for example, smoking (31), have been associated with stable long-term changes in DNA methylation in blood and other peripheral tissues. Importantly, DNA methylation patterns are largely tissue specific. ADHD symptom level-associated DNA methylation differences in peripheral tissues such as blood are likely to reveal epigenetic consequences of differential life conditions that correlate with ADHD (biomarker of exposures). The extent to which DNA methylation in peripheral tissues is informative...
about epigenetic mechanisms that contribute to interindividual differences in ADHD symptoms or that correlate with causal epigenetic mechanisms in other tissues is unknown. It has been reported that DNA methylation levels in blood correlate to a limited extent with methylation levels in other tissues, including the brain (32–35). One explanation for such correlations is that methylation quantitative trait locus (mQTL) effects correlate to some extent across tissues, as was recently demonstrated for cis mQTL effects in blood and brain (36).

Several candidate gene studies, most of limited sample size (mean 192; range, 82–426), have reported associations between ADHD symptoms in children and DNA methylation in cord blood (13), peripheral blood (14,18,20), buccal samples (22), and saliva (19,20). Other candidate approaches in small samples have reported relationships between DNA methylation, ADHD symptoms, and environmental risk factors (15,21,23). To date, three epigenome-wide association studies (EWASs) of ADHD (symptoms) in children have been published (16,19,24). The first study measured DNA methylation in saliva in a small group of boys with ADHD and control subjects (age 7–12 years, sample size = 112) and reported genes with suggestive evidence for association (19). The second study measured DNA methylation in 384 cord blood samples and found no significant differences between children who later received a diagnosis of ADHD and controls (24). The largest EWAS (817 children in a population-based study in the United Kingdom) identified 13 loci, where DNA methylation level in cord blood was significantly predictive of ADHD symptom trajectories between age 7 and 15 years (16); among those was ST3GAL3, one of the significant loci from the genome-wide association study (GWAS) of ADHD (4). As both DNA methylation and ADHD symptoms change with age, it is unknown if findings in children persist in adulthood. Moreover, the robustness of associations between ADHD symptoms and DNA methylation remains to be investigated in larger studies of multiple cohorts.

We report the first EWAS meta-analysis of ADHD symptoms in adults; this is also the largest EWAS of ADHD symptoms to date. We assessed the association between whole-blood DNA methylation and ADHD symptoms in three population-based cohorts: the Netherlands Twin Register (NTR), the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study from New Zealand, and the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study from the United Kingdom. In secondary analyses, we 1) tested if CpGs with a lower, albeit nonsignificant, p value showed enrichment for loci previously identified in GWASs of psychiatric disease or in EWASs of psychiatric phenotypes or exposures; 2) analyzed differentially methylated regions (DMRs) to examine the evidence for small methylation differences at multiple nearby CpGs; and 3) examined the relationship between DNA methylation and RNA transcript levels in blood, the effects of mQTLs, and the correlation between DNA methylation in blood and brain to facilitate the biological interpretation of findings.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Overview

The EWAS was performed in three cohorts (Figure 1): NTR (37) (N = 2232 individuals from twin families), Dunedin study (38) (N = 800 unrelated individuals), and E-Risk (39) (N = 1631 twins). Results were combined in a meta-analysis to identify differentially methylated positions (DMPs) and to examine heterogeneity of effects across cohorts. Next, we performed secondary analyses. Genome-wide meta-analysis test statistics were used to test for enrichment of ADHD EWAS signals in loci detected in previous GWASs and EWASs of relevant traits. We performed DMR analyses in each cohort, compared results across cohorts, and performed a meta-analysis–based DMR analysis. Functional follow-up analyses were performed on top DMPs from the meta-analysis (nominal p value < 1.0 × 10−5) and on significant DMRs. Further details about the analyses are provided in Supplement 1.

Ethical Permission

The study protocol was approved by the institutional ethical review boards of the participating universities. Study members gave informed consent before participating. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

ADHD Symptoms

The EWAS in NTR was performed on the Conners Adult ADHD Rating Scale (CAARS) index (total ADHD symptoms) (Figure S1A in Supplement 1) (40). Sensitivity analyses were performed on DSM-IV–based CAARS inattention and hyperactivity subscales, available for 1846 samples. In the Dunedin study, DSM-5 ADHD symptoms (Figure S1B in Supplement 1) were assessed based on private structured interviews as described previously (41) at age 38 years. In the E-Risk study, DSM-5 ADHD symptoms (Figure S1C in Supplement 1) were assessed based on private structured interviews as described previously (42) at age 18 years.

Peripheral Blood DNA Methylation

DNA methylation was assessed with the Infinium Human-Methylation450K BeadChip Kit (Illumina, Inc., San Diego, CA). Normalization was performed with functional normalization in NTR (43), with methylumi in the Dunedin Study, and with dasen in E-Risk (44). The following probes were removed from all cohorts: sex chromosomes; probes with a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) within the CpG site (at the C or G position), regardless of minor allele frequency, based on the Genome of the Netherlands reference population (45); probes with common (>5% minor allele frequency) SNPs within 10 bp of the single base extension site (46); and ambiguous mapping probes with an overlap of at least 47 bases per probe (47). Only methylation sites that were present in all cohorts were kept in the analysis, leaving 394,194 sites.

Statistical Analyses

Epigenome-wide Association Study. The association between DNA methylation levels and ADHD symptoms was tested for each site under a linear model (Dunedin) or generalized estimating equation model accounting for relatedness of twins and other family members (NTR and E-Risk); methylation β value was assessed as outcome, and the following predictors were used: ADHD symptoms, sex, smoking status, white blood cell percentages, age at blood sampling (only in NTR), cohort-specific technical covariates (i.e., sample plate
Epigenome-wide Association Study of ADHD Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary analyses</th>
<th>Study-specific EWAS analyses</th>
<th>Secondary analyses</th>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NTR N=2258</td>
<td>Dunedin N=800</td>
<td>E-Risk N=1631</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-analysis of 394 194 CpGs N=4689</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and array row or principal components based on control probes, and principal components based on genome-wide SNPs. Analyses were performed in R (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria). The R package Bacon was used to compute the Bayesian inflation factor (48).

**Meta-analysis.** A p value–based fixed-effects sample size–weighted meta-analysis was performed in METAL (49). The sample size–weighted method was chosen because of the differences in measurement scales of ADHD symptoms across studies. Statistical significance was assessed considering Bonferroni correction for the number of methylation sites tested ($\alpha = .05/394194 = 1.3 \times 10^{-4}$). False discovery rate Q values are presented in Supplemental Tables S1 through S14 in Supplement 2. The $F$ statistic provided by METAL was evaluated to assess heterogeneity.

**Inattention and Hyperactivity.** For top DMPs, sensitivity analyses were performed in which the association of these DMPs with inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity subscales was tested in NTR.

**Overlap With EWAS and GWAS Loci.** Enrichment analysis was performed to examine whether CpGs in or near loci detected by GWASs or top-ranking CpGs from previous EWASs, on average, showed a stronger association with ADHD symptoms than other genome-wide Infinium Human-Methylation450K methylation sites. We considered the most recent GWASs for ADHD (4), major depressive disorder (50), schizophrenia (51), and autism spectrum disorder (52) and the largest available EWASs on ADHD symptoms in children (16), schizophrenia (53), smoking (31), and maternal smoking (30).

**Differentially Methylated Regions.** We used the python module comb-p (54) to identify regions where multiple correlated methylation sites show evidence for association with ADHD symptoms. We report significant regions (Sidák $p < .05$) with at least two methylation sites within a 500-bp window. Comb-p was applied in each of the three cohorts separately and on the meta-analysis results.

**Functional Follow-up Analyses.** In follow-up analyses, previously published datasets were used to test if DNA methylation level at top DMPs and at CpGs within significant DMRs were associated with whole-blood gene expression level in cis (55) and with whole-blood mQTLs (55) and to examine the correlation between DNA methylation in blood and four brain regions (prefrontal cortex, entorhinal cortex, superior temporal gyrus, and cerebellum) (34).

**Power Analysis.** Power analyses are described in Supplement 1.

**RESULTS**

**Meta-analysis**

Demographic information of the cohorts is provided in Table 1. Genome-wide EWAS test statistics from each cohort showed no inflation (Figure S2 in Supplement 1; Table S1 in Supplement 2). One significant DMP ($\alpha = 1.3 \times 10^{-7}$) was detected in Dunedin (cg26197679, chromosome 8 intergenic) and none in NTR and E-Risk. Meta-analysis of the three cohorts ($N = 4689$) detected no significant DMPs, and meta-analysis test statistics showed no inflation (Figure S2 in Supplement 1; Table S1 in Supplement 2). Summary statistics for genome-wide methylation sites are provided in Table S2 in Supplement 2. Top DMPs with a nominal $p$ value ($p < 1.0 \times 10^{-5}$) are presented in Table 2. Two top DMPs showed a negative relationship with ADHD symptoms (cg26197679, intergenic, and cg23144852, gene body OPA1), and one DMP showed a positive relationship with ADHD symptoms in all cohorts (cg10984962, gene body AGAP1). The effect sizes for these DMPs in the individual cohorts are presented in Table S3 in Supplement 2. In NTR, an increase of 1 SD in CAARS ADHD symptoms (3.9 points) was associated with a methylation change of $-0.04\%$ (cg26197679), $-0.16\%$ (cg23144852), and $0.10\%$ (cg10984962).

**Heterogeneity of Top DMPs**

One top DMP (cg26197679) displayed large between-study heterogeneity ($I^2 = 93.6\%$, heterogeneity $p = 1.6 \times 10^{-7}$). This DMP showed the strongest association with ADHD symptoms and was epigenome-wide significant in the Dunedin study, where an increase of 1 SD in DSM-5 ADHD symptoms was associated with a methylation change of $-0.62\%$. Although the effect size was weaker in the other cohorts, the direction of association was the same in all cohorts (Table 2). Inspection of all top-ranking sites from the individual cohorts ($p < 1.0 \times 10^{-5}$; 14 sites) revealed that all sites were characterized by substantial between-study heterogeneity (mean $F = 87.2\%$; range, 71.3%–93.8%) (Table S4 in Supplement 2). Nine sites (64.3%) showed the same direction of effect across all cohorts.
Epigenome-wide Association Study of ADHD Symptoms

Table 1. Cohort Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>NTR (N = 2258)</th>
<th>Dunedin Study (N = 800)</th>
<th>E-Risk Study (N = 1631)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAARS ADHD Index</td>
<td>7.9 (3.9)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSM-5 Adult ADHD Symptoms</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.5 (2.3)</td>
<td>5.8 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at Blood Sampling, Years</td>
<td>37.3 (12.9)</td>
<td>38 (0)</td>
<td>18 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex, Female</td>
<td>1549 (69.0%)</td>
<td>392 (49.0%)</td>
<td>817 (50.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Smoker</td>
<td>438 (19.4%)</td>
<td>162 (20.3%)</td>
<td>372 (22.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Smoker</td>
<td>532 (23.6%)</td>
<td>233 (29.1%)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Smoked</td>
<td>1288 (57.0%)</td>
<td>405 (50.6%)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonsmoker</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1259 (77.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are presented as mean (SD) or n (%).

ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; CAARS, Conners Adult ADHD Rating Scale; NTR, Netherlands Twin Register.

In NTR, 2258 samples from 2232 individuals were included (for 26 individuals, two longitudinal DNA samples were included).

In E-Risk, the smoking variable that was included as covariate in the analyses and that is presented in this table is current daily smoking at age 18.

Inattention and Hyperactivity

In sensitivity analyses, the association with inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity subscales, separately, was tested in NTR for the three top DMPs from the meta-analysis. This analysis showed that the direction of effect and the strength of the association with each of the subscales was highly similar (Table S5 in Supplement 2).

Enrichment of EWAS and GWAS Loci

In testing for overlap of our EWAS meta-analysis results with findings from previous EWASs and GWASs, we failed to observe enrichment of CpGs previously associated with longitudinal ADHD trajectories in children (16) or schizophrenia in adults (53); CpGs associated with individual (31) or maternal smoking (30); and CpGs near GWAS loci for ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, major depressive disorder, or schizophrenia (Table S6 in Supplement 2). Methylation sites previously associated with schizophrenia (53) showed a small but significant depletion of signal for ADHD symptoms.

Differentially Methylated Regions

In NTR, six significant DMRs were identified, which spanned from 164 to 848 bp and included 3 to 32 CpGs (Table 3; Table S7 in Supplement 2). One example is illustrated in Figure S3 in Supplement 1. In the Dunedin study, 19 significant DMRs were identified, spanning from 2 to 51 CpGs within regions of 18 to 1818 bp (Table 3; Table S7 in Supplement 2). In E-Risk, no significant DMRs were identified. Six distinct DMRs were detected in the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) region (chromosome 6): three in NTR and three in the Dunedin study. In line with the heterogeneity of DMP results across cohorts, none of the DMRs detected in NTR and Dunedin overlapped, and DMR analysis on the meta-analysis of the three cohorts did not detect significant DMRs.

Significant DMRs did not overlap with CpGs from the previous EWAS of ADHD trajectories in children (16) or with schizophrenia in adults (53). One of the six DMRs identified in NTR (chromosome 6: 33245460 to 3324630) contained CpGs previously associated with smoking (12 of the 32 CpGs) and maternal smoking (3 CpGs). Five of the 19 DMRs identified in the Dunedin study contained CpGs associated with smoking or maternal smoking (Table S7 in Supplement 2).

Several DMRs were located in proximity of SNPs associated with schizophrenia (51). Of the DMRs in NTR, two were located within 100 kb and one was located within 1 Mb of schizophrenia-associated SNPs, respectively (all in the MHC region). Five DMRs in the Dunedin study were located within 1 Mb of schizophrenia-associated SNPs (two on chromosome 6, two on chromosome 7, and one on chromosome 15). None of the DMRs was located within 1 Mb of significant GWAS loci for ADHD, major depressive disorder, or autism spectrum disorder.

Gene Expression in cis

To examine potential functional consequences of top DMPs and DMRs, we used previously published data on whole-blood DNA methylation and RNA sequencing (n = 2101 samples). Whereas DNA methylation levels at the ADHD symptom level top DMPs were not associated with RNA levels of genes in cis, methylation levels at CpGs within five of the six significant DMRs detected in NTR were associated with expression levels of 14 genes (Table 3; Table S8 in Supplement 2). At one DMR, higher methylation level correlated with lower expression; at another DMR, higher methylation level correlated with higher expression; and at three DMRs, expression of some genes correlated positively and others negatively with methylation level. Of the 19 DMRs identified in the Dunedin study, the methylation levels at CpGs within three DMRs were associated with expression levels of seven genes (Table 3; Table S9 in Supplement 2). At two DMRs, a higher methylation level correlated with lower expression, and at one DMR, a higher methylation level correlated with higher expression.

Table 2. Top DMPs From EWAS Meta-analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cgID</th>
<th>CHR</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Nearest Gene</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Z Score</th>
<th>p Value</th>
<th>Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cg26197679</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>142310085</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Intergenic</td>
<td>LINCO01300</td>
<td>4689</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
<td>1.1 × 10^-6</td>
<td>– – –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cg23144852</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>193405999</td>
<td>OPA1</td>
<td>Gene body</td>
<td>OPA1</td>
<td>4684</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
<td>1.7 × 10^-6</td>
<td>– – –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cg10984982</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>236462202</td>
<td>AGAP1</td>
<td>Gene body</td>
<td>AGAP1</td>
<td>4688</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>9.7 × 10^-6</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CpGs with a p value < 1.0 × 10^-5 are shown.

CHR, chromosome; DMPs, differentially methylated positions; EWAS, epigenome-wide association study; +, positive direction of effect; –, negative direction of effect.

*Genome build Hg19 (build 37).

Total sample size in the meta-analysis.
Table 3. Significant DMRs Associated With ADHD Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHR</th>
<th>Start (n)</th>
<th>End (bp)</th>
<th>Region Size (bp)</th>
<th>Region Sidek p Value</th>
<th>Genes</th>
<th>Gene Expression Associated With CpGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31560735</td>
<td>31651363</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>4.3 × 10⁻¹⁰</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>67417958</td>
<td>67418406</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>7.6 × 10⁻⁹</td>
<td>AIF1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31583915</td>
<td>31584224</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>1.2 × 10⁻⁹</td>
<td>AIF1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>33245460</td>
<td>33245980</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>3.0 × 10⁻⁵</td>
<td>B3GALT4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>113613574</td>
<td>113613738</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.8 × 10⁻⁵</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>48632484</td>
<td>48633145</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>2.1 × 10⁻⁴</td>
<td>COL7A1</td>
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</table>

Dunedin Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHR</th>
<th>Start (n)</th>
<th>End (bp)</th>
<th>Region Size (bp)</th>
<th>Region Sidek p Value</th>
<th>Genes</th>
<th>Gene Expression Associated With CpGs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>32063394</td>
<td>32065212</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1818</td>
<td>2.3 × 10⁻¹⁷</td>
<td>TNXB</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>191127</td>
<td>192104</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>4.4 × 10⁻¹ⁱ</td>
<td>LFRRC14B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>17931932</td>
<td>17932370</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>2.3 × 10⁻⁸</td>
<td>INS1L3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>748999</td>
<td>749621</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>4.9 × 10⁻⁸</td>
<td>C20orf54</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>32847441</td>
<td>32847846</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>1.3 × 10⁻⁶</td>
<td>PPP1R2P1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>75019070</td>
<td>75019377</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>4.8 × 10⁻⁶</td>
<td>CYP1A1</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5658183</td>
<td>5658623</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>5.1 × 10⁻⁶</td>
<td>POCL2</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1769152</td>
<td>1769646</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>494</td>
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<td>HCCA2, LOC402778, LOC402778</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>18673332</td>
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<td>90728141</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>1250757</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>6.4 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2728344</td>
<td>2728913</td>
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<td>569</td>
<td>8.8 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>AMZ1</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>41653673</td>
<td>41656080</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>1.5 × 10⁻⁴</td>
<td>ANK1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>25801455</td>
<td>25801622</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>3.5 × 10⁻⁴</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>3247958</td>
<td>3248099</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>2.3 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>96670623</td>
<td>96671170</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>3.9 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>BDKRB2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>22795685</td>
<td>22795775</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>8.7 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>96</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>1993528</td>
<td>1993546</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>MyOM2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More detailed information on the regions is provided in Table S7 in Supplement 2. More detailed results for the association between DNA methylation levels and gene expression in cis is provided in Table S8 in Supplement 2 (Netherlands Twin Register) and Table S9 in Supplement 2 (Dunedin study). No significant DMRs were found in E-Risk.

ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; CHR, chromosome; DMRs, differentially methylation regions.

Total number of methylation sites in the window.

Genes mapping to CpGs in the window.

Methylation Quantitative Trait Loci

To gain insight into genetic causes of variation underlying top DMPs and DMRs, we obtained whole-blood mQTL data (n = 3841 samples) (55). One of the three top DMPs from the ADHD symptom meta-analysis was associated with six independent SNPs (mQTLs) in cis (Table S10 in Supplement 2). The majority of DMRs (92.0%; 23) was associated with mQTLs. For ADHD-associated DMRs in NTR, on average 68% of the CpGs within a DMR (range, 36.4%–92.3%) was associated with at least one mQTL SNP. A total of 164 mQTL associations were identified for NTR DMRs (76.8% were cis mQTLs and 23.2% were trans mQTLs) (Table S11 in Supplement 2), involving 59 CpGs and 55 SNPs. For ADHD-associated DMRs in Dunedin, 323 mQTL associations were identified, involving 126 CpGs and 154 SNPs (88% cis and 13% trans) (Table S12 in Supplement 2). On average, 64.9% (range, 0%–100%) of CpGs within DMRs identified in the Dunedin study was associated with one or more mQTLs. We highlight one example: a DMR on chromosome 11, detected in NTR and associated with the expression of ACY3, was associated with cis and trans mQTLs, and the correlation structure of DNA methylation within this DMR (Figure S2 in Supplement 2) mirrored the sharing across CpGs of trans-mQTLs on chromosome 6 (Figure S3 in Supplement 2). Comparing the overlap of mQTLs across cohorts revealed that two DMRs were associated with a common set of trans mQTLs. The DMR on chromosome 11 in NTR (associated with expression of ACY3) and the DMR on chromosome 15 in Dunedin (associated with expression of SEMA4B) were both associated in trans with SNPs on chromosome 6: 109626965 to 109616420 (rs9374080, rs1008084, and rs9386791).

Correlation Between DNA Methylation Level in Blood and Brain

Whereas DNA methylation levels at the ADHD symptom top DMRs did not correlate significantly between blood and brain, CpGs within 4 of the 6 DMRs (66.7%) detected in...
NTR (Table S13 in Supplement 2) and 13 of the 19 DMRs (68.4%) detected in the Dunedin study (Table S14 in Supplement 2) showed significantly correlated DNA methylation levels between blood and one or multiple brain regions. For all CpGs except for one, the correlation was positive (mean \( r = .50 \); range, \(-.42 \) to \(.70 \)). The number of CpGs per DMR that showed correlated methylation levels between blood and brain ranged from 1 to 31 (mean 5.5). The DMR with the largest number of CpGs with significant blood-brain correlations (31 CpGs) was a DMR in the MHC region detected in the Dunedin study and associated with the expression level of multiple genes, including C4A and C4B. An exemplary plot of methylation levels in blood and brain for one CpG in this region (cg01337207) is provided in Figure S5 in Supplement 1.

**DISCUSSION**

We performed an EWAS of ADHD symptoms in three population-based adult cohorts. Our hypothesis was that DNA methylation in blood may provide insight into epigenetic consequences of life conditions that correlate with ADHD symptoms and potentially into epigenetic mechanisms that contribute to ADHD symptoms or that correlate with causal epigenetic mechanisms in the brain. In the Dunedin study, we identified one significant DMP where a higher methylation level correlated with fewer ADHD symptoms (cg26197679, chromosome 8 intergenic). This CpG as well as other top-ranking CpGs from individual cohorts showed considerable heterogeneity, and no significant DMPs were detected in a meta-analysis of the three cohorts. In secondary region-based analyses, we tested if ADHD symptoms were associated with methylation differences at multiple nearby CpGs that individually failed to reach epigenome-wide significance. We identified six significant DMRs in NTR, 19 in the Dunedin study, and none in E-Risk. In line with the heterogeneity of DMP results, none of the DMRs overlapped across cohorts, and the meta-analysis–based DMR analysis did not detect significant DMRs. With respect to effects of differential exposures, although the EWAS signal showed no significant enrichment for CpGs previously associated with smoking, some DMRs contained CpGs previously associated with smoking (31) or maternal smoking (30), even after we adjusted for smoking. There are several possible explanations for this finding (56): 1) residual confounding effects of smoking; 2) second-hand smoking exposure, including maternal prenatal smoking; 3) exposures other than smoking; for instance, ADHD is associated with general substance use (57); and 4) these CpGs are connected to a shared underlying biology of ADHD symptoms and smoking. Importantly, the current study shows that effects of mQTLs and correlated methylation levels between blood and brain exceed effects of smoking: 92% of DMRs were associated with genetic variants, 68% of DMRs showed correlated methylation levels between blood and brain regions, and 24% of DMRs were associated with smoking. These observations suggest that interindividual differences in DNA methylation at these DMRs are not merely driven by lifestyle differences associated with ADHD symptoms, such as smoking, and that some of the methylation differences in whole blood associated with ADHD symptoms may be a marker for methylation variation in the brain.
reported: 7% in NTR (62), 3% in the Dunedin study (42), and 8% in E-Risk (43). Fifth, the cohorts were from different countries, and it is possible that epigenetic differences exist between cohorts owing to differences in genetic background or in the presence and frequency of environmental exposures.

We performed a power analysis for the three meta-analysis top DMPs, based on their effect size observed in NTR (Figure S6 in Supplement 1). The effect sizes of these three DMPs ranged from 0.09% to 0.92% explained variance. For the top DMP that showed the least heterogeneity (cg10984962; AGAP1; variance explained 0.28% in NTR), the required sample size to achieve 80% power is 13,508. Similar to our population-based EWAS of ADHD symptoms, a recent blood-based EWAS meta-analysis of cognitive abilities identified only a few significant sites for most cognitive measures in >6000 individuals (63).

Several limitations apply to epigenetic epidemiology studies, including ours. First, the HumanMethylation450K array captures only approximately 1.7% of all CpGs in the genome, and the removal of methylation probes that overlap with genetic polymorphisms, albeit inevitable because these polymorphisms compromise the quality of microarray-based measurements of DNA methylation, may limit the ability to detect DNA methylation-mediated SNP effects on the phenotype. Second, blood is unlikely to provide a complete picture of ADHD-related epigenetic processes because epigenetic markers are largely tissue specific. Yet, methylation changes in blood have already been associated with ADHD symptoms (16), other psychiatric conditions (53), cognition (63), and hippocampal volume (64) in earlier studies. Furthermore, we found that several of the DMRs detected in blood contain CpGs with correlated methylation levels across blood and brain. Finally, a general constraint in epigenetic studies is that trait-associated variation in DNA methylation may arise secondary to trait development (reverse causality) or may be a marker of trait-associated environmental exposures (lifestyle; medication use; infections; and early life environmental factors, such as nutrition and maternal smoking). These associations nevertheless may provide valuable insight into the underlying biological changes associated with ADHD and its risk factors. The (direction of) causality may be addressed in human studies, for example, with longitudinal study designs or Mendelian randomization (65).

In conclusion, by performing an EWAS of ADHD symptoms in three population-based adult cohorts, we found no significant sites in an EWAS meta-analysis of 4689 individuals and observed considerable heterogeneity of effects across cohorts. We found several significant cohort-specific DMPs and DMRs, with the MHC region emerging in two cohorts. The significance of these findings is unknown, but they may point at new candidate pathways awaiting further replication. Larger studies are necessary to identify methylation sites in whole blood that are robustly associated with population-based ADHD symptoms in adults. Our findings also illustrate the need for further research to examine to what extent epigenetic associations with psychiatric traits depend on characteristics such as age, sex, lifetime exposures, genetic background, symptom severity, and comorbidities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DISCLOSURES

NTR: NTR was supported by Biobanking and Biomolecular Research Infrastructure, the Netherlands (BBMRI-NL), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) 480-15-001/674, Netherlands Twins Registry Repository: researching the interplay between genome and environment (NWO 184.021.007), and Aggression in Children: Unraveling gene-environment interplay to inform Treatment and Intervention strategies (ACTION). ACTION receives funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Program (FP7/2007–2013) (Grant No. 602768). NTR was also supported by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science Professor Award (Grant No. PAH/6635 to DIB), Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (Vici Grant No. 016-130-669 to BF), Dutch National Science Agenda for the NWANeuroLab.nl project (Grant No. 400 17 602 to BF), European Community FP7 (Grant No. 602805 [Aggressotyde] to BF), and European Community Horizon 2020 Program (H2020/2014–2020) (Grant No. 728018 [E2ZbeNICE] to BF).

Dunedin study: The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit was supported by the New Zealand Health Research Council and New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and also by the National Institutes of Health National Institute of Aging (Grant No. R01AG032282), Medical Research Council (Grant No. MR/P005918), and Jacobs Foundation. This work used a high-performance computing facility partially supported by Grant No. 2016-IDG-1013 (“HARDAC - Reproducible HPC for Next-generation Genomics”) from the North Carolina Biotechnology Center.

E-Risk study: The E-Risk study was supported by the Medical Research Council (Grant No. G1002190), National Institutes of Health Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Grant No. HD077482), American Asthma Foundation Distinguished Investigator Award (to JM), Jacobs Foundation, Avielle Foundation, Economic and Social Research Council Mental Health Leadership Fellowship (to LA), and Medical Research Council Skills Development Fellowship (to JA-B). This work used a high-performance computing facility partially supported by Grant No. 2016-IDG-1013 (“HARDAC - Reproducible HPC for Next-generation Genomics”) from the North Carolina Biotechnology Center.

NTR: We thank the twins and their family members for their participation. Dunedin study: We thank the Dunedin Study members, unit research staff, and study founder Phil Silva.

E-Risk study: We thank the study families for their participation and members of the E-Risk team for their dedication, hard work, and insights.

The HumanMethylation450K BeadChip and RNA sequencing data from the BIOS Consortium are available in the European Genome-phenome Archive, under accession code EGAD000010003878. Data from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development are available via a managed access system (contact: ac115@duke.edu). The HumanMethylation450K BeadChip DNA methylation data from the E-Risk study are available in Gene Expression Omnibus under accession number GSE105018.

BF has received educational speaking fees from Shire and MEDICE. The other authors report no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

From the Department of Biological Psychology (JvD, Ntz, Dib), Amsterdam Public Health Research Institute, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam; Departments of Human Genetics and Psychiatry (BF), Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; Department of Psychology and Neuroscience (KS, AG, TEM) and Center for Genomic and Computational Biology (KS, AC, Dlc, TEM), Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; University of Exeter Medical School (EJH, JM), University of Exeter, Exeter; Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre (AC, JA-B, LA, TEM), Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London, London, United Kingdom; and Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit (RP), Department of Psychology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

BIOS Consortium (Biobank-based Integrative Omics Study): Management team: Bastiaan T. Heijmans (Chair)1, Peter A.C. ‘t Hoen2, Joyce van Meurs3, Aaron Isaacs4, Rick Jansen5, Lude Franke6 Cohort collection; Dorret I. Boomsma7, René Pool8, Jenny van Dongen9, Jouke J. Hottenga10 (Netherlands Twin Register); Marleen M.J. van
Epigenome-wide Association Study of ADHD Symptoms

Greevenbroek, Coen D.A. Stehouwer, Carla J.H. van der Kallen, Casper G. Schalkjijk (Cohort study on Diabetes and Atherosclerosis Maastricht); Csica Wijmenga, Lude Franke, Sasha Zhermakova, Ettje F. Tijmgelaar (LifeLines Deep); P. Eline Slagboom, Marijn Beerken, Joris Deelen, Diana van Heemst (Leiden Longevity Study); Jan H. Veldink, Leonhard H. van den Berg (Prospective ALS Study Netherlands); Cornelis M. van Duijn, Bert A. Hofman, Aaron Isaacs, André G. Uittenlinden (Rotterdam Study)

Data generation: Joyce van Meurs (Chair), P. Mila Jhamai, Patrick Deelen, Freerk van Dijk (Co-Chair), Michiel van Galen, Wibowo Arindrarto, Jeroen van Rooij, Nico Lakenberg (Rotterdam Study) Data management and computational infrastructure: Hailiang Mei (Chair), Maarten van IJsen, Michel van Gaalen, Jan Bot, Dasha V. Zhermakova, Rick Jansen, Peter van ‘t Hof, Patrick Deelen, Irene Nooren, Peter A.C. ‘t Hoen, Bastiaan T. Heijmans, Matthijs Moed (Rotterdam Study) Data analysis group: Lude Franke (Co-Chair), Martijn Vernaat, Dasha V. Zhermakova, René Luijk, Jan Mark Bonder, Maarten van IJsen, Patrick Deelen, Feerkan van Dijk, Michel van Gaalen, Wilbovo Arindrarto, Szymon M. Kielbasa, Morris A. Swertz, Erik W. van Zewel, Rick Jansen, Peter-Bram ‘t Hoen (Co-Chair), Bastiaan T. Heijmans (Co-Chair)

Molecular Epidemiology Section, Department of Medical Statistics and Bioinformatics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands; Department of Human Genetics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands; Department of Internal Medicine, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Department of Genetic Epidemiology, Erasmus MC, University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Department of Psychiatry, VU University Medical Center, Neuroscience Campus Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Department of Genetics, University of Groningen, University Medical Centre Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; Department of Biological Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, Neuroscience Campus Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Department of Genetics, University of Groningen, University Medical Centre Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; Department of Biological Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, Neuroscience Campus Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Department of Internal Medicine and School for Cardiovascular Diseases (CARIM), Maastricht University Medical Center, Maastricht, The Netherlands; Department of Gerontology and Geriatrics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands; Department of Neurology, Brain Center Rudolf Magnus, University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Department of Epidemiology, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; Sequence Analysis Support Core, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands; SURFSara, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Genomics Coordination Center, University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands; Medical Statistics Section, Department of Medical Statistics and Bioinformatics, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands

Address correspondence to Jenny van Dongen, Ph.D., Department of Biological Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 7-9, A. Amsterdam, Noord-Holland 2081BT, Netherlands; E-mail: j.van.dongen@vum.nl.

Received Jul 8, 2018; revised Feb 7, 2019; accepted Feb 8, 2019.

Supplementary material cited in this article is available online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.02.016.

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