Early-Stage Visual Processing and Cortical Amplification Deficits in Schizophrenia

Pamela D. Butler, PhD; Vance Zemon, PhD; Isaac Schechter, PsyD; Alice M. Saperstein, BA; Matthew J. Hoptman, PhD; Kelvin O. Lim, MD; Nadine Revheim, PhD; Gail Silipo, MA; Daniel C. Javitt, MD, PhD

Background: Patients with schizophrenia show deficits in early-stage visual processing, potentially reflecting dysfunction of the magnocellular visual pathway. The magnocellular system operates normally in a nonlinear amplification mode mediated by glutamatergic (N-methyl-D-aspartate) receptors. Investigating magnocellular dysfunction in schizophrenia therefore permits evaluation of underlying etiologic hypotheses.

Objectives: To evaluate magnocellular dysfunction in schizophrenia, relative to known neurochemical and neuroanatomical substrates, and to examine relationships between electrophysiological and behavioral measures of visual pathway dysfunction and relationships with higher cognitive deficits.

Design, Setting, and Participants: Between-group study at an inpatient state psychiatric hospital and outpatient county psychiatric facilities. Thirty-three patients met DSM-IV criteria for schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, and 21 nonpsychiatric volunteers of similar ages composed the control group.

Main Outcome Measures: (1) Magnocellular and parvocellular evoked potentials, analyzed using nonlinear (Michaelis-Menten) and linear contrast gain approaches; (2) behavioral contrast sensitivity measures; (3) white matter integrity; (4) visual and nonvisual neuropsychological measures, and (5) clinical symptom and community functioning measures.

Results: Patients generated evoked potentials that were significantly reduced in response to magnocellular-biased, but not parvocellular-biased, stimuli (P = .001). Michaelis-Menten analyses demonstrated reduced contrast gain of the magnocellular system (P = .001). Patients showed decreased contrast sensitivity to magnocellular-biased stimuli (P < .001). Evoked potential deficits were significantly related to decreased white matter integrity in the optic radiations (P < .03). Evoked potential deficits predicted impaired contrast sensitivity (P = .002), which was in turn related to deficits in complex visual processing (P = .04). Both evoked potential (P < .04) and contrast sensitivity (P = .01) measures significantly predicted community functioning.

Conclusions: These findings confirm the existence of early-stage visual processing dysfunction in schizophrenia and provide the first evidence that such deficits are due to decreased nonlinear signal amplification, consistent with glutamatergic theories. Neuroimaging studies support the hypothesis of dysfunction within low-level visual pathways involving thalamocortical radiations. Deficits in early-stage visual processing significantly predict higher cognitive deficits.

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Author Affiliations: Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research, Orangeburg, NY; (Drs Butler, Schechter, Hoptman, Revheim, and Javitt and Ms Saperstein and Silipo); Department of Psychiatry, New York University School of Medicine, New York (Drs Butler, Hoptman, and Javitt); Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University, Bronx, NY (Dr Zemon); and University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (Dr Lim).
stimulus configurations and object identification. A further focus of the study, therefore, is in the delineation of the differential functional roles of the magnocellular and parvocellular systems in visual processing dysfunctions.

Both the magnocellular and parvocellular pathways begin in the retina and project, by means of lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN), to primary visual cortex (striate cortex, V1). From primary visual cortex, magnocellular information is conveyed preferentially to parieto-occipital cortex and other dorsal-stream visual areas (the where pathway), and parvocellular information is conveyed preferentially to temporoparietal cortex and other ventral-stream visual areas (the what pathway), although crosstalk between pathways also occurs.27,31,32 Both the optic radiations (open circles) and projections from LGN to V1 (closed circles) will have contrast gain and plateau responses (Figure 1). Contrast gain is defined as the slope of the contrast response curve at the semisaturation point and calculated as Rmax/2s. The NMDA antagonist D-APV produces a characteristic reduction in Rmax and contrast gain, with no corresponding change in semisaturation point (s), and plateau response (Figure 1). A decrease in slope and plateau with no change in semisaturation point indicates a decrease in amplification of the response.36 Figure 1. Characteristic, nonlinear contrast response function of cat lateral geniculate nucleus neuron (open circles) showing the effect of N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) antagonism with D-2-amino-5-phosphonovaleric acid (D-APV) (closed circles). Nonlinear response properties of this system are modeled using the Michaelis-Menten equation, which provides separate estimates for sensitivity (semisaturation point, s) and peak response (Rmax). Contrast gain is defined as the slope of the curve at the semisaturation point and calculated as Rmax/2s. The NMDA antagonist D-APV produces a characteristic reduction in Rmax and contrast gain, with no corresponding change in semisaturation point (s), and plateau response (closed circles). Data are from Kwon et al37 and are similar to those reported elsewhere. A decrease in slope and plateau with no change in semisaturation point indicates a decrease in amplification of the response.38 (Figure adapted with permission from Kwon et al.)

A second distinguishing feature of the magnocellular and parvocellular systems is their differential sensitivity to object size within the visual field. Magnocellular neurons receive input from larger regions of the visual field than do parvocellular neurons.24 As a result, the magnocellular system is particularly sensitive to large objects (low spatial frequency), whereas the parvocellular system is more sensitive to small objects (high spatial frequency). Because larger stimuli are processed preferentially by the magnocellular system, such stimuli can typically be detected even when the contrast level is below 10%. In contrast, smaller stimuli are generally detected at contrast thresholds significantly above 10%, indicating reliance on parvocellular mechanisms. Contrast sensitivity to larger and smaller stimuli can therefore be used to determine the behavioral integrity of the magnocellular and parvocellular systems, respectively.20,21,60 An underlying hypothesis of this project is that disturbances in early-stage, low-level processing in the visual system will “upwardly generalize” to erode processing at higher stages of the visual system.

The present study evaluates visual processing dysfunction in schizophrenia using a combined ssVEP, behavioral, and structural approach. For ssVEP studies, stimuli were biased toward magnocellular vs parvocell-
ular processing by manipulating luminance contrast. In the magnocellular-selective condition, stimuli appeared and disappeared, a manipulation that preferentially engages the magnocellular system. Conversely, in the parvocellular-selective condition, stimuli were modulated around a high 48% level of contrast (pedestal) that saturates the magnocellular response and so isolates the additional parvocellular activation.9,41

For behavioral studies, stimuli were biased toward the magnocellular vs parvocellular system by manipulating spatial frequency, and the contrast level needed for target detection was assessed. For both ssVEP and behavioral studies, brief (≤32 milliseconds) stimuli were used to limit cross talk between systems. For structural evaluation, DTI-based fractional anisotropy (FA) of white matter integrity was assessed in multiple visual areas, including both low-level optic radiations connecting LGN and V1 and higher-level projections involving dorsal- and ventral-steam structures. Finally, patients were assessed using a neuropsychological battery consisting of both visually related and visually unrelated measures known to be affected in schizophrenia, as well as standardized symptomatic and functional assessments, to assess the contribution of early-stage deficits to higher-level neurocognition and global outcome in schizophrenia.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Informed consent was obtained from 33 patients (26 men, 7 women) meeting DSM-IV criteria for schizophrenia (n=27) or schizoaffective disorder (n=6) at inpatient and outpatient facilities associated with the Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research (Orangeburg, NY) and 21 healthy volunteers (13 men, 8 women) of similar age, following a full explanation of the procedures (Table 1). Diagnoses were obtained using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV® and all available clinical information. All patients were receiving antipsychotic medications at the time of testing. We excluded healthy volunteers with a history of Axis I psychiatric disorder, as defined by the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV.

Patients and controls were excluded if they had any neurological or ophthalmologic disorders that might affect performance or if they met criteria for alcohol or substance dependence within the last 6 months or abuse within the last month. All participants had 20/30 corrected visual acuity or better on a steady background.45 The luminance of the checks was sinusoidally modulated around the standing contrast level (pedestal) so that stimuli appeared and disappeared. For the parvocellular-selective condition, stimuli modulated below that of the static background, producing negative contrast (dark checks).

**STEADY-STATE VISUAL EvOKED PEnTuTIALS**

Steady-state visual evoked potentials were obtained as previously described.4 Steady-state visual evoked potentials were elicited by sinusoidal temporal modulation of an array of isolated checks (16 × 16 checks; each 15 minutes of arc of visual angle) on a steady background.46 The luminance of the checks was modulated below that of the static background, producing negative contrast (dark checks). Steady-state visual evoked potentials were biased toward magnocellular vs parvocellular systems in separate runs through the use of different pedestals.4 In both conditions, luminance of the checks was sinusoidally modulated around the standing contrast level (pedestal) in 7 steps (0%, 1%, 2%, 4%, 8%, 16%, and 32%), leading to 7 levels of depth of modulation (DOM) per run. For the magnocellular condition, the pedestal equaled the DOM so that stimuli appeared and disappeared. For the parvocellular condition, the pedestal equaled 48% so that contrast never went below 16%.

Each of the 7 steps of DOM was presented for approximately 1 second so that each run lasted approximately 7 seconds. Stimuli were presented at a temporal frequency of 12 Hz.

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**Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Patients With Schizophrenia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean ± SEM Measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chlorpromazine daily equivalent (n = 33), mg</td>
<td>1194.0 ± 91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antipsychotics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atypical</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness duration (n = 29), y</td>
<td>14.5 ± 1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPRS total score (n = 27)</td>
<td>36.9 ± 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANS total score (including global scores) (n = 27)</td>
<td>42.8 ± 2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAF score (n = 21)</td>
<td>39.7 ± 1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAIS-III Digit Symbol scaled score (n = 29)</td>
<td>5.2 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Performance Test–Identical Pairs (n = 16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit rate, 2 digits</td>
<td>0.4 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit rate, 3 digits</td>
<td>0.3 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit rate, 4 digits</td>
<td>0.3 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQ (Quick Test) (n = 25)</td>
<td>93.4 ± 3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin Card Sorting (n = 27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categories achieved, No.</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perservative errors, No.</td>
<td>19.8 ± 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMS III Logical Memory recall (story A) score (n = 27)</td>
<td>6.9 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAIS-R Digit Span (n = 27)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digits Forward raw score</td>
<td>6.9 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digits Backward raw score</td>
<td>5.2 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAIS-R Vocabulary scaled score (n = 26)</td>
<td>6.7 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAIS-R Information scaled score (n = 27)</td>
<td>7.4 ± 0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILS-PB scaled score (n = 31)</td>
<td>30.7 ± 1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviations:** BPRS, Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale; GAF, Global Assessment of Functioning; ILS-PB, Problem Solving Factor of the Independent Living Scales; SANS, Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms; WAIS-III, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Third Edition; WAIS-R, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, Revised Edition; WMS III, Wechsler Memory Scale, Third Edition.

*The version of the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test used was the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test–64: Computer Version (Psychological Assessment Resources, Lutz, Fla).*
Ten magnocellular-biased runs followed by 10 parvocellular-biased runs were presented in a set for patients and controls. Steady-state visual evoked potentials were recorded from an occipital midline site relative to the nose using gold-cup electrodes. A ground electrode was placed at the parietal site. Ten runs for each participant were averaged, and signal-to-noise ratios (SNRs) were obtained for each DOM. As previously described, the SNR is the amplitude of the response at the stimulus frequency divided by an estimate of noise at that frequency. Signal-to-noise ratio values greater than or equal to 1 indicate a significant ssVEP response at an α level of 0.05.

To derive quantitative parameters for the magnocellular and parvocellular contrast-response functions, regressions to non-linear and linear equations were performed, respectively. The magnocellular curves, which are nonlinear, were fitted using the nonlinear Michaelis-Menten equation. Three interrelated parameters were extracted: $R_{\text{max}}$, the plateau response; contrast gain, the slope of the curve at the semisaturation point; and $s$, the semisaturation contrast, which is the DOM required to produce half-maximal SNR. The parameters are related according to the formula: $\text{contrast gain} = \frac{R_{\text{max}}}{2s}$.

The parvocellular-biased contrast response functions, which are primarily linear, were fitted using a linear regression equation, yielding an estimate for slope.

### CONTRAST SENSITIVITY FUNCTIONS

Contrast sensitivity functions were obtained by presenting 7 horizontal sine-wave gratings at the following spatial frequencies: 0.5, 1, 2, 4, 7, 10, and 21 cycles per degree. Spatial frequency is the number of pairs or cycles of light and dark bars in 1 degree of visual angle, expressed as cycles per degree. Each grating was presented for 32 milliseconds. An up-and-down transformed response method was used to obtain contrast thresholds with a criterion of 70.7% correct responses for each spatial frequency. The mean of 10 reversals was used to obtain thresholds.

Presentation of the different spatial frequency gratings was interleaved in a random order. A spatial 2-alternative forced-choice procedure was used. Gratings were presented on either the right or left side of the screen, and the participant was asked to say on which side the gratings appeared. To decrease the difficulty of the task and to minimize response errors, the experimenter rather than the participant pressed the buttons on the keypad to signify that the grating was seen on the left or the right side.

Results were plotted as contrast sensitivity, which is the reciprocal of threshold, vs spatial frequency. Increased contrast sensitivity indicates better performance.

### GENERAL PROCEDURE FOR ELECTROPHYSIOLOGY AND PSYCHOPHYSICS

Participants were tested binocularly after being light-adapted to the background luminance of the display for several minutes. Participants received ssVEP testing after which contrast sensitivity functions were obtained.

### MRI

Imaging was conducted on a 1.5-Tesla Siemens Vision system (Siemens, Erlangen, Germany) at the Nathan Kline Institute as previously described. Briefly, axial DTI scans were acquired with a pulsed gradient, double-spin echo, echo planar imaging sequence. The scans were performed with the following parameters: repetition time, 6000 milliseconds; echo time, 100 milliseconds; 128 × 128 matrix interpolated to 256 × 256; field of view, 240 mm; b, 900 seconds/mm²; number of excitations, 4; 20 slices; slice thickness, 5 mm; gap, 0 mm; 6 diffusion directions. Fractional anisotropy measures were calculated. Image analysis and quantification was performed using custom, Interactive Data Language–based software language (Research Systems, Boulder, Colo).

### RESULTS

#### STEADY-STATE VISUAL EVOKED POTENTIALS

SNR Analyses

For the magnocellular-biased condition, SNRs of 1.0 or more (ie, exceeding background noise) were obtained at 1% DOM for both the patients with schizophrenia and controls (Figure 2A). Analysis of variance conducted across all levels of DOM showed a highly significant between-group effect for patients vs controls ($F_{1,30}=13.0$, $P=.001$). There was also a significant interaction be-
Contrast Gain Analyses

For both the schizophrenia and control groups, as expected, the magnocellular contrast response curves were markedly nonlinear, with initial steep slope followed by plateau at about 16% DOM. For both schizophrenia and control groups, highly reliable fits were obtained to mean data using the nonlinear Michaelis-Menten equation. Linear curve fits were obtained for the magnocellular-biased condition using linear regression. For the magnocellular condition, analysis of variance showed a significant between-group effect. For the parvocellular condition, while there was no significant between-group effect, a significant between-group difference was observed at 32% depth of modulation ($t = 3.0, df = 50, P = .004$). Asterisk indicates $P < .05$.

Slope and plateau levels obtained using steady-state visual evoked potentials (ssVEPs) for patients with schizophrenia and healthy controls in test conditions using luminance contrast to emphasize magnocellular or parvocellular pathways. No plateau is given for the parvocellular-biased condition because of the nonsaturating nature of the response. Slope was calculated for the magnocellular-biased condition using the Michaelis-Menten equation and for the parvocellular-biased condition using a linear regression equation. Asterisk indicates $P < .001$; NA, not applicable.

Figure 2. Steady-state visual evoked potential signal-to-noise ratios for patients with schizophrenia and healthy controls in test conditions using luminance contrast to emphasize magnocellular or parvocellular visual pathways. Nonlinear curve fits were obtained for the magnocellular-biased contrast response function using the Michaelis-Menten equation. Linear curve fits were obtained for the parvocellular-biased condition using linear regression. For the magnocellular condition, analysis of variance showed a significant between-group effect. For the parvocellular condition, while there was no significant between-group effect, a significant between-group difference was observed at 32% depth of modulation ($t = 3.0, df = 50, P = .004$). Asterisk indicates $P < .05$.

Figure 3. Slope and plateau levels obtained using steady-state visual evoked potentials (ssVEPs) for patients with schizophrenia and healthy controls in test conditions using luminance contrast to emphasize magnocellular or parvocellular pathways. No plateau is given for the parvocellular-biased condition because of the nonsaturating nature of the response. Slope was calculated for the magnocellular-biased condition using the Michaelis-Menten equation and for the parvocellular-biased condition using a linear regression equation. Asterisk indicates $P < .001$; NA, not applicable.

Figure 4. Psychophysical contrast sensitivity functions for patients with schizophrenia and healthy controls. Values are plotted as contrast sensitivity, defined as the reciprocal of contrast threshold percentage. Corresponding contrast thresholds are shown on the right side. Results at the lower spatial frequencies are indicative of performance of the magnocellular system, and results at the higher spatial frequencies are indicative of performance of the parvocellular system. Asterisk indicates $P < .002$.

CONTRAST SENSITIVITY

Analysis of variance conducted across all levels of spatial frequency revealed a significant between-group effect ($F_{1,40} = 81.6, P < .001$), as well as a significant group $\times$ spatial frequency interaction ($F_{6,94} = 13.1, P < .001$), indicating selective deficits in magnocellular-biased stimulus detection (Figure 4). Further, contrast sensitivity deficits correlated significantly with deficits in ssVEP performance ($r = 0.55, n = 30, P = .002$) (Figure 5), reflect-
ing a significant intercorrelation between electrophysiological and behavioral measures.

**STRUCTURE-FUNCTION RELATIONS**

Representative regions of interest for optic radiations for the FA map are shown in Figure 6A. There was a significant correlation between optic radiation FA and magnocellular-biased \((r = 0.59, n = 14, P = .02)\), but not parvocellular-biased \((r = 0.40, n = 14, P = .09)\), ssVEP responses (Figure 6B). No significant correlations between magnocellular- or parvocellular-biased ssVEP responses and FA were found for any other brain region.

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VISUAL PROCESSING MEASURES, NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING, AND OUTCOME**

Patients are characterized with respect to neuropsychological performance in Table 1. Decreased contrast sensitivity at 0.5 cycles per degree was significantly correlated with poorer performance on the Digit Symbol task and with hit rate on the 4-digit Continuous Performance Task–Identical Pairs, measures of visual processing, as well as with digits backward and forward and IQ (Quick Test). In contrast, no significant correlations were found with the Wisconsin Card Sorting (WCS) or Logical Memory (Table 2).

No significant correlations were found between either contrast sensitivity at 21 cycles per degree or magnocellular- and parvocellular-biased ssVEP results and neuropsychological functioning. However, magnocellular- \((r = 0.37, n = 30, P = .04)\) and parvocellular-biased \((r = 0.44, n = 30, P = .01)\) ssVEP measures and contrast sensitivity at 0.5 cycles per degree \((r = 0.44, n = 30, P = .01)\) all correlated significantly with the Problem Solving Factor of the Independent Living Scales, a surrogate measure of community functioning.

Magnocellular-biased ssVEP performance also correlated significantly with scores on the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms or Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale. No significant correlations were found between parvocellular-biased ssVEP performance or contrast sensitivity measures and scores on the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms, Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale, or Global Assessment of Functioning.

**MEDICATION EFFECTS**

No significant correlation was found between magnocellular-biased ssVEP responses \((r = -0.15, n = 32, P = .4)\) or between contrast sensitivity at 0.5 cycles per degree \((r = -0.16, n = 31, P = .4)\) and chlorpromazine equivalents. Further, significant deficits in magnocellular ssVEP generation \((F_{1,42} = 9.9, P = .003)\) and contrast sensitivity \((F_{1,41} = 71.1, P < .001)\) compared with controls were observed even in the subgroup of patients receiving atypical antipsychotics alone.

A significant negative correlation was found between parvocellular-biased ssVEP responses and chlorpromazine equivalents \((r = -0.46, n = 32, P = .008)\), although no correlation was observed with contrast sensitivity at 21 cycles per degree \((r = -0.02, n = 31, P = .9)\). No differences were observed between subjects receiving atypical antipsychotics alone vs those receiving mixed typical and atypical medication on any measure.

**COMMENT**

Over the past decade, deficits in early visual processing in patients with schizophrenia have become increasingly well-documented, although underlying mechanisms remain obscure. Deficits are particularly prominent in processes, such as motion detection or backward masking, that depend mainly upon magnocellular input to the dorsal visual stream and in detection of low contrast and low spatial frequency stimuli. However, deficits have been observed as well even in processing of parvocellular-biased stimuli. The present study demonstrates that deficits in contrast gain, a form of neural amplification, may be critically involved in early cortical dysfunction in schizophrenia. Diffusion tensor imaging results support the hypothesis that deficits in the generation of magnocellular-biased ssVEPs are related to dysfunction at low levels of the visual system. In addition, deficits in behavioral detection of simple magnocellular-biased stimuli correlate with deficits in magnocellular-biased ssVEPs, confirming a critical role of early cortical dysfunction in visual behavioral deficits.

The present results support our previous report of a preferential magnocellular dysfunction using ssVEP. There was a significant statistical interaction between group and visual pathway, indicating greater involvement of the magnocellular system under the conditions studied. As in previous studies, however, this study does not preclude parvocellular involvement in schizophrenia as well, and in fact, an isolated deficit was observed in patients at the highest level of DOM. Thus, early stage processing in general appears impaired, with the degree of impairment greater for the magnocellular visual system than it is for parvocellular visual system.
The preferential magnocellular dysfunction reported here seems to occur at low levels of the visual system. First, the ssVEP stimuli, which used luminance contrast, were chosen because they differentially activate magnocellular vs parvocellular neurons in LGN and primary visual cortex. Indeed, the magnocellular and parvocellular contrast response functions are very similar to what is seen from single-cell recordings in monkey LGN. Second, a significant relationship was found between decreased magnocellular-biased ssVEP responses and decreased white matter integrity in the optic radiations, which project from LGN to striate cortex. Significant relationships between ssVEP responses and white matter integrity at higher levels of the visual system were not found.

These DTI findings provide direct support for the hypothesis that magnocellular dysfunction occurs at the earliest stages of visual responsivity. Previous reports of decreased white matter integrity in occipital white matter adjacent to the splenium of the corpus callosum provide anatomical support for a relationship between white matter deficits in low-level visual areas and ssVEP deficits. Fractional anisotropy deficits can be produced by primary glial or neuronal pathology with patterns resembling those of schizophrenia and that positive NMDA modulators such as glycine ameliorate specific symptoms and signs. The decreased contrast gain and plateau in the magnocellular-biased ssVEP contrast response curve for patients with schizophrenia in the present study (Figure 2A) closely resembles results seen following microinfusion of an NMDA antagonist into cat LGN (Figure 1). Further, the correlation between reduced optic radiation integrity and ssVEP deficits resembling those of schizophrenia and that positive NMDA modulators such as glycine ameliorate specific signs and symptoms. The decreased contrast gain and plateau in the magnocellular-biased ssVEP contrast response curve for patients with schizophrenia in the present study (Figure 2A) closely resembles results seen following microinfusion of an NMDA antagonist into cat LGN (Figure 1). Further, the correlation between reduced optic radiation integrity and ssVEP deficits supports models in which impaired afferent information flow contributes to early-stage visual processing deficits in schizophrenia and other psychiatric disorders. However, the specific neural mechanisms underlying these deficits remain to be elucidated.
schizophrenia. In controls but not patients, a deviation from linear gain in the parvocellular response was seen at 32% DOM, indicating that the critical issue underlying the deficit in schizophrenia may not be pathway, but the characteristics of the processing involved. Thus, the capacity of neuronal systems for nonlinear gain (ie, amplification) may be reduced in general in schizophrenia, but in the visual system, nonlinear gain is more characteristic of the magnocellular system than it is of the parvocellular system. We predict that more pervasive deficits might be observed under other conditions that drive the parvocellular system into a nonlinear gain process.

With regard to behavioral findings, we report a differential deficit in the ability of patients with schizophrenia to detect low and medium (0.5-7 cycles per degree) vs high (10-21 cycles per degree) spatial frequency stationary gratings, as reflected in a significant group × spatial frequency interaction. In the low and middle spatial frequency range, contrast sensitivity values (which are the reciprocals of thresholds) for patients and controls were in the range of 50 to 100, corresponding to threshold levels of 1% to 2% contrast. Thus, when contrast detection thresholds were in the magnocellular-selective range, and especially when stimuli were biased toward the magnocellular system by spatial frequency (ie, lower spatial frequencies), patients showed deficits relative to controls. However, when stimuli were biased toward the parvocellular system at the highest spatial frequency, contrast sensitivity values for patients and controls were approximately 3, corresponding to thresholds of 33% contrast. This value is above the magnocellular-selective range and thus reflects parvocellular involvement. Taken together, these findings suggest that contrast sensitivity, like ssVEP, is relatively preserved for the parvocellular system but impaired for the magnocellular system in schizophrenia.

To date, literature regarding contrast sensitivity deficits in schizophrenia, to date, has been conflicting, with some groups finding deficits to low and middle spatial frequency gratings20,21,69 and others not40,70. Differences may be due to methodological issues70 or to type of antipsychotic medication.71 However, the present results suggest that absolute contrast threshold levels may also be a factor. In particular, studies that have found behavioral deficits to high spatial frequency gratings have typically used long (400-500 milliseconds) presentation rates yielding thresholds of approximately 10% or less.20,21 At the shorter 32-millisecond duration used in the present study, absolute thresholds were in the parvocellular range, and no deficit was seen to high spatial frequency. Thus, the critical parameter across studies may be absolute contrast level rather than spatial frequency alone. A more recent study further confirms magnocellular dysfunction in schizophrenia through the use of different contrast levels.72

Recent studies have revealed a variety of visual processing deficits in schizophrenia, particularly in such tasks as motion detection, trajectory, and spatial localization41,17,40,53,72-74 that reflect dysfunction of the dorsal visual stream. Because the dorsal stream receives primary input from the magnocellular visual pathway,73 deficits in magnocellular function may also underlie higher-order dorsal visual pathway dysfunction. For example, microinfusion of NMDA antagonists into V1 disrupts cortical processing of motion information,72 a process that is also impaired in schizophrenia.17,40,73,74

Deficits in higher-order stages of visual processing, as indexed by tasks used in the present study (Digit Symbol, Continuous Performance Task–Identical Pairs), have been shown consistently to contribute to poor functional outcomes in schizophrenia,22,76 although the neurophysiological basis for these deficits has yet to be determined. The present study demonstrates a chain of correlation from early-stage electrophysiological disturbance (ssVEP) through basic sensory processing (contrast sensitivity) to complex visual processing (Digit Symbol, Continuous Performance Task–Identical Pairs), mediated as well by structural alterations within basic visual pathways (optic radiation FA). In contrast to the chain of relationships within visually based behaviors, no correlations were observed between ssVEP or contrast sensitivity and Logical Memory or Wisconsin Card Sorting performance, a putative measure of prefrontal dysfunction in schizophrenia—suggesting specificity of relationships within the visual system. Thus, cognitive dysfunction in schizophrenia most likely involves dysfunction within broadly distributed neural networks, with dysfunction of early-stage visual areas contributing specifically to dysfunction of ecologically relevant complex visual behaviors.

A limitation of this study is that all the patients were receiving medications at the time of testing. Thus, the possibility of a medication effect must be considered. However, visual processing deficits have been observed in both medicated and unmedicated patients10,35,77-80 as well as in first-degree relatives of patients with schizophrenia72,81-82 and people with schizotypal personality disorder84 who are not receiving medication.

Chen et al73 have suggested that contrast-sensitivity deficits are related to medication such that they are found only in patients taking typical, rather than atypical, antipsychotics. In the present study, deficits were observed even in patients receiving atypical antipsychotics alone, suggesting that patient characteristics rather than medication type might be the primary predictor of visual dysfunction. Finally, no significant correlations were found between chlorpromazine equivalents and magnocellular-biased ssVEP performance or contrast sensitivity, although a significant correlation was found between chlorpromazine equivalents and parvocellular-biased ssVEP performance, a task on which patients did not show a deficit in the analysis of variance. Thus, it is unlikely that the differential deficits shown in this study are due to a medication effect.

In summary, this study demonstrates deficits in early-stage visual processing involving especially the magnocellular visual system. The pattern of deficits is consistent with predictions of glutamatergic NMDA models. Across patients, deficits in early-stage neurophysiological function contribute significantly to lower-level visual deficits (eg, contrast sensitivity), which contribute in turn to higher-level deficits such as performance in Digit Symbol and Continuous Performance Task–Identical Pairs tasks. Neurophysiological deficits correlated as well with structural deficits of optic radiations.
documenting the importance of subcortical as well as cortical dysfunction in schizophrenia.

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Correspondence: Pamela D. Butler, PhD, Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research, 140 Old Orangeburg Rd, Orangeburg, NY 10962 (butler@nki.rfmh.org).

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