Postnatal Tshz3 Deletion Drives Altered Corticostriatal Function and Autism Spectrum Disorder–like Behavior

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Heterozygous deletion of the TSHZ3 gene, encoding for the teashirt zinc-finger homeobox family member 3 (TSHZ3) transcription factor that is highly expressed in cortical projection neurons (CPNs), has been linked to an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) syndrome. Similarly, mice with Tshz3 haploinsufficiency show ASD-like behavior, paralleled by molecular changes in CPNs and corticostriatal synaptic dysfunctions. Here, we aimed at gaining more insight into “when” and “where” TSHZ3 is required for the proper development of the brain, and its deficiency crucial for developing this ASD syndrome.

METHODS: We generated and characterized a novel mouse model of conditional Tshz3 deletion, obtained by crossing Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup> with CalMKIIalpha-Cre mice, in which Tshz3 is deleted in CPNs from postnatal day 2 to 3 onward. We characterized these mice by a multilevel approach combining genetics, cell biology, electrophysiology, behavioral testing, and bioinformatics.

RESULTS: These conditional Tshz3 knockout mice exhibit altered cortical expression of more than 1000 genes, ~50% of which have their human orthologue involved in ASD, in particular genes encoding for glutamatergic synaptic components. Consistently, we detected electrophysiological and synaptic changes in CPNs and impaired corticostriatal transmission and plasticity. Furthermore, these mice showed strong ASD-like behavioral deficits.

CONCLUSIONS: Our study reveals a crucial postnatal role of TSHZ3 in the development and functioning of the corticostriatal circuitry and provides evidence that dysfunction in these circuits might be determinant for ASD pathogenesis. Our conditional Tshz3 knockout mouse constitutes a novel ASD model, opening the possibility for an early postnatal therapeutic window for the syndrome linked to TSHZ3 haploinsufficiency.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, Cortex, Sociability, Stereotypies, Striatum, Synaptopathy

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.03.974

The basal ganglia constitute a functional network of subcortical structures playing a crucial role in extrapyramidal motor control and motor learning, as well as in associative learning, planning, working memory, and emotion. The striatum is the main input station of the basal ganglia, receiving major projections coming from layer 5 (L5) cortical projection neurons (CPNs). These corticostriatal glutamatergic afferences contact mainly striatal spiny projection neurons (SPNs), the major neuronal population of this nucleus (1–3). There is accumulating evidence showing altered development and function of corticostriatal circuitry and striatal dysmorphic features in autistic patients (4–10). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a heterogeneous group of neurodevelopmental pathologies characterized by impairments in social communication and interaction, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (11). ASD etiology has a strong genetic component, with a high number of genes and factors involved (12–15). Accordingly, abnormal corticostriatal function has also been found in ASD mouse models, such as Shank3<sup>–/–</sup> (16,17), neurelin<sup>–/–</sup> (18), and 16p11<sup>–/–</sup> mouse (19). In this context, we have recently identified TSHZ3 (teashirt zinc-finger homeobox family member 3, also known as ZNF537) as a susceptibility gene for ASD: patients with heterozygous TSHZ3 deletion show ASD neurodevelopmental phenotypes including autistic behavior and intellectual disability, and in particular, speech disturbance; renal tract abnormalities are also frequently observed in these patients (20). TSHZ3 gene codes for the highly conserved, zinc-finger homeodomain transcription factor TSH3, whose expression starts during prenatal development in both human and mouse (21). Moreover, TSHZ3 has been identified in human neocortical gene networks with the highest expression during late fetal development, which have been linked to not only ASD but also other neuropsychiatric disorders and IQ (20,22). Tshz3-null mutation in mouse (Tshz3<sup>–/–</sup>) leads to...
altered expression of cortical layer markers (20) and is lethal at birth (23), suggesting that TSHZ3 plays a critical role during prenatal brain development. Interestingly, heterozygous Tshz3 deletion in mice (Tshz3<sup>+/−</sup>) faithfully mimics the human disorder, as these animals show reduced sociability, narrowed field of interest, stereotypes, and anxiety, associated with renal tract defects. These ASD-like symptoms are paralleled by altered expression of neocortical gene markers at both embryonic (embryonic day 18.5 [E18.5]) and postnatal (postnatal day 5 [P5] and P20) stages, and by altered function of the corticostriatal pathway (20). However, L5 CPNs, which project to the ipsi- and/or contralateral striatum, express TSHZ3 not only during fetal development, but also postnatally and in adulthood, an expression pattern that is comparable in human and mouse (20,21,24,25). The postnatal development of the corticostriatal circuitry has been little characterized, but previously described in the primary motor and somatosensory cortex (20). However, L5 CPNs, which project to the ipsi- and/or contralateral striatum, express TSHZ3 not only during fetal development, but also postnatally and in adulthood, an expression pattern that is comparable in human and mouse (20,21,24,25). The postnatal development of the corticostriatal circuitry has been little characterized, but studies in animals have shown that its maturation progresses after birth (26–30). Therefore, the postnatal role of TSHZ3 in the maturation and function of the corticostriatal system needs to be elucidated.

For this, we generated a novel conditional mutant mouse with Tshz3 deletion in CPNs at an early postnatal stage. We show here that this time- and region-specific loss of Tshz3 results in ASD-relevant behavioral deficits similar to those we previously described in Tshz3<sup>+/−</sup> mice, which are paralleled by cortical and striatal changes in terms of gene expression, synaptic transmission, and synaptic plasticity. These data suggest that postnatal events might contribute to the TSHZ3-linked ASD syndrome, opening perspectives for a possible early therapeutic window.

**METHODS AND MATERIALS**

Additional methods and materials are provided in Supplement 1.

**Generating Tshz3-Conditional Knockout Mice**

Animal experimental procedures were approved by the Comité National de Réflexion Ethique sur l’Expérimentation Animale 14’ (57-07112012) and in agreement with the European Communities Council Directive (2010/63/EU). Conditional mouse mutants with postnatal loss of Tshz3 in the cortex (hereby referred to as Tshz3-pnCxKO) were generated by crossing Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup> mice with CaMKI<sup>lalpa</sup>-Cre that express the CRE-recombinase in glutamatergic CPNs, as described in Supplement 1. Control mice were Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup>.

**Morphometric and Dendritic Spine Analysis of L5 CPNs**

We used transgenic mouse lines (age P28) expressing Thy1-green fluorescent protein (GFP) in L5 CPNs (31). Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3-pnCxKO mice were obtained by crossing CaMKI<sup>lalpa</sup>-Cre;Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup> male mice with Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup> female mice heterozygous for Thy1-GFP. Stacks from 100-μm vibratome sections (1-μm z-step) were acquired using a Zeiss LSM780 (Carl Zeiss Meditec, Oberkochen, Germany) laser scanning confocal microscope (40× objective, zoom 0.6). Isolated Thy1-GFP-positive L5 CPNs of the primary motor and somatosensory cortex were imaged and reconstructed using the NeuronJ plugin of ImageJ, 1.45s (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD) in 2-dimensional projections. All dendrites were semimanually traced and labeled as primary (dendrite originating from the soma), secondary (extending from the primary dendrite), or higher-order dendrites. Fifteen cells were reconstructed for each genotype from 4 littermate pairs of P28 control (Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3<sup>lox/lox</sup>) and mutant (Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3-pnCxKO) mice. Sholl cross-analysis was performed by counting the number of dendrites intersecting concentric spherical radii at 10-μm intervals. Differences at specific radii were analyzed using unpaired Student’s t test.

Analysis of spine density and morphology was performed on 4 littermate pairs (see above). Images were acquired as described above (63× objective, numerical aperture 1.4, 0.03 μm/pixel, voxel size 0.033 μm<sup>2</sup> × 0.37 μm). Spine counts were obtained from second- or third-order basal dendritic branches of randomly selected L5 CPNs. Dendrites from five to seven cells were analyzed per animal, providing a cumulated dendrite length >750 μm for each genotype. Spine identification and density were evaluated using NeuronStudio (32). Statistical analysis was performed using an unpaired Student’s t test (BiostaTGV statistical software; http://www.u707.jussieu.fr/).
Electrophysiology

Procedures were similar to those described previously (20,33). See also Supplement 1. Acute coronal corticostriatal slices (250-μm thick) from Tshz3-pnCxKO and control mice (P21–28) were obtained as previously described (20,33). Whole-cell patch-clamp recordings were performed in oxygenated artificial cerebrospinal fluid at 34°C to 35°C, flowing at ~2.5 mL/min. L5 CPNs of the primary motor and somatosensory cortex and SPNs of the dorsolateral striatum were identified by infrared video microscopy and by their electrophysiological properties (34,35), and were recorded in whole-cell patch-clamp by borosilicate micropipettes (5–6 MΩ) filled with an internal solution containing 125-mM K-gluconate, 10-mM NaCl, 1-mM CaCl2, 2-mM MgCl2, 0.5-mM BAPTA, 19-mM HEPES, 0.3-mM Na-guanosine triphosphate, and 1-mM Mg-adenosine triphosphate, pH 7.3. For measuring N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA)/alpha-amino-3-hydroxy-5-methyl-4-isoxazole propionic acid (AMPA) ratio experiments, the internal solution contained 140-mM CsCl, 10-mM NaCl, 0.1-mM CaCl2, 10-mM HEPES, 1-mM EGTA, 2-mM Mg-adenosine triphosphate, and 0.5-mM Na-guanosine triphosphate, pH 7.3. For measuring gamma-aminobutyric acidergic (GABAergic) synaptic transmission, the internal solution contained 126-mM CsCH3SO3, 10-mM HEPES, 1-mM EGTA, 2-mM Mg-adenosine triphosphate, and 0.3-mM Na-guanosine triphosphate, pH 7.3. A stimulating bipolar electrode was placed either in the cortex at the level of L4 to activate local fibers and evoke glutamatergic excitatory postsynaptic currents (EPSCs) and GABAergic inhibitory postsynaptic currents in L5 CPNs, or in the corpus callosum to
activate corticostriatal fibers and evoke EPSCs in striatal SNPs. Glutamatergic synaptic transmission was recorded in the presence of 50-μM picrotoxin at a holding potential of −60 mV (L5 CPNs) or −80 mV (SNPs). Miniature EPSCs were recorded in the presence of 10-μM tetrodotoxin. GABAergic synaptic transmission was recorded in the presence of 10-μM cyanquixaline and 10-μM AP-5. Electrophysiological data were acquired by an AxoPatch 200B amplifier and pClamp 10.2 software (Molecular Devices, Wokingham, United Kingdom). Series and input resistance were continuously monitored by sending 5-mV pulses, and neurons showing ≥20% change in these parameters were discarded from the analysis.

Statistical analysis was performed by Prism 7 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA). Two-tailed Mann-Whitney test was used for comparing two datasets, two-tailed Kruskal-Wallis and Dunn’s post-test was used for comparing ≥3 datasets, 2-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used for comparing cumulative distributions, and one- and two-way analysis of variance was used for multiple comparisons. Sample size (n) refers to the number of recorded neurons. The significance threshold was fixed at p < .05. Tests used, p values, and n are indicated in the figures. Data are expressed as mean ± SEM.

Behavioral Testing
Male mice 101 to 127 days old were maintained in a social enriched environment and tested blind to the genotype for ASD-like criteria (11). Stereotypy scores were 1) the burying score obtained with marbles (36) and 2) the number of repeated dips in a hole board (37). A small number of crossed zones in an open field indicated a narrow field of interest (20). Sociability and interest in social novelty were measured in a two-chamber task (20,38) adapted from the three-chamber task (39). Although not included in DSM-5 criteria, anxiety, intellectual disability, and motor disorders are observed in 42% to 56%, 45%, and 79%, respectively, of ASD patients (40). The presence of these symptoms was assessed by the elevated plus maze (20), Morris water maze, and notched bar.
test (41), respectively. For further details and behavioral testing, see Supplement 1.

The assumption of statistical normality was checked. Analyses of covariance were conducted with genotype as independent variable and activity as covariate, for each score where the activity level must be controlled for. Repeated-measures analysis of covariance was used for testing sociability and social novelty. A two-tailed independent t test was used for the other comparisons. The results are expressed as effect size because the validation of an organism model for a disorder or a disease requires a significant difference and also a large (pathological) difference. Similar to previous articles, effect sizes are expressed as $\eta^2$ or partial $\eta^2$ as specified case by case, where values of .30 and .50 correspond to “mild impairment” and “impairment,” respectively, by analogy with the intellectual disability field (40,41). Data are expressed as mean ± SEM.

**Gene Set Enrichment Analysis**

Preranked gene lists were calculated based on the –log₁₀ of the p value from DESeq2 (https://bioconductor.org/) analysis multiplied by the sign of differential expression (Table S3T in Supplement 3). Gene matrix transposed (.gmt) files for Gene Ontology terms, as well as pathways, were downloaded from the Bader website (http://baderlab.org/GeneSets) (42). Data from the SynaptomeDB were received by the authors (43) and transformed into a .gmt file. Data from the Genes to Cognition (G2C) Synapse Proteomics Database were downloaded from the website (http://www.genes2cognition.org/proteomics/) (44) and transformed into a .gmt file. We performed Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA) using the software provided by the Broad Institute (45,46) with default parameters. For SynaptomeDB, as well as G2C Synapse Proteomics data, we also used the WebGestalt webserver (http://www.webgestalt.org/).
**RESULTS**

### Morphological Characterization of Conditional Tshz3 Knockout Mice

Analysis of TSHZ3 expression in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice at P28 (a time allowing strong Cre expression and recombination, as well as brain maturation) showed almost complete loss of this protein in the neocortex (Figure S1A, B in Supplement 1). Using the corticostriatal circuit as a model system, we evidenced it by cholera toxin subunit B retrograde tracing: the ipsi- and contralateral components of the corticostriatal projections were present in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice as in control mice (Figure S1C-F in Supplement 1). Labeling of NeuN (49) and BCL11B/CTIP2 (50), a neuron-specific and an L5/6-selective marker, respectively, was similar in both groups, further suggesting that the postnatal loss of Tshz3 affects neither the number of cortical neurons nor their layering (Figure S1G–L in Supplement 1). In Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3-pnCxKO mice, we did not observe major changes in the overall CPN morphology and projections (Figure S2 in Supplement 1), confirming the lack of major morphological defects after postnatal Tshz3 loss. Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3-pnCxKO mice were also used for Sholl analysis of L5 CPN dendrite morphology, revealing no major changes between control and mutant mice (Figure S3 in Supplement 1). However, we found a significantly reduced spine density in L5 CPNs (Figure 1), in agreement with other ASD-related mouse models (51). Finally, the density of vesicular glutamate transporter 1 staining was similar in control and Thy1-GFP-M;Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (Figure S4 in Supplement 1), suggesting unchanged density of corticostriatal terminals.

### Electrophysiological Properties of L5 CPNs

The two main subtypes of L5 CPNs, pyramidal tract (PT) and intratelencephalic (IT) CPNs, were distinguished according to their electrophysiological properties (see Supplement 1), in particular the sum of the “sag & rebound” + the after-hyperpolarization responses (Figure 2B), whose value is larger in PT neurons (52). This “sag & rebound” + after-hyperpolarization sum was similar in control and Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (Figure 2C), indicating no major changes in membrane properties of CPNs and in the proportion of PT versus IT neurons. Other membrane and action potential (AP) properties were similar comparing IT versus PT neurons of the same genotype, as well as between PT and IT neurons of control versus Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (Table S1 in Supplement 1). Moreover, also comparing AP discharge patterns of PT versus IT neurons of the same genotype revealed no significant differences (Figure S6 in Supplement 1). We thus pooled PT and IT neurons of each genotype for further analyses. CPNs from Tshz3-pnCxKO mice showed a lower number of APs in response to depolarizing current pulses compared with control mice. This lower number of action potentials was associated with a longer after-hyperpolarization (Figure 2A). The number of APs in control spiny projection neurons (Figure 2A), in agreement with other ASD-related mouse models (51), was not observed in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (Figure S4 in Supplement 1), and its recovery by AP-5. *p < .05, **p < .001 compared with baseline, Mann-Whitney test. 

## Accession Codes

Raw data (FastQ files) from the sequencing experiment (triplicates from wild-type and Tshz3-mutant cortices) and raw abundance measurements for genes (read counts) for each sample are available from Gene Expression Omnibus under accession GSE119791, which should be quoted in any manuscript discussing the data.

option.php) (47). Network of GSEA enrichments was produced using Cytoscape (48).

Figure 5. Corticostriatal synaptic plasticity. (A) Long-term potentiation (LTP) is similar in spiny projection neurons from conditional mutant mice with postnatal loss of Tshz3 in the cortex (Tshz3-pnCxKO) and control mice (n = 10 and 7, respectively). The left graph shows the time course of excitatory post-synaptic current (EPSC) amplitude normalized to baseline (black arrow represents LTP induction protocol). The right histogram shows normalized EPSC amplitude after the LTP induction protocol (p < .001 compared with baseline, Mann-Whitney test). Traces depict sample EPSCs at baseline and 15 minutes after the LTP induction protocol (as indicated). ***p < .001. (B) Long-term depression (LTD) is present in control spiny projection neurons (n = 10), while it is absent in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (n = 11), where a transient potentiation is observed. The application of 40–80 µM AP-5 abolishes the transient potentiation and partially restores LTD (n = 7). Sample traces depict EPSCs at baseline and 15 minutes after LTD induction protocol in the different experimental conditions (as indicated). Note the absence of LTD in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice and its recovery by AP-5. *p < .05, **p < .001 compared with baseline, Mann-Whitney test; p < .05, ***p < .001 between groups, Kruskal-Wallis and Dunn’s post-test. (A, B) Data are expressed as mean ± SEM.

mice, although values were not significantly different (Figure 2D). The inter-AP interval in response to a strong depolarizing current (+300 pA) was also similar (Figure 2E). However, when measuring this parameter in response to a threshold current step (+150 pA, just above the rheobase), we found that the inter-AP intervals were significantly longer in CPNs from Tshz3-pnCxKO mice, suggesting increased accommodation and, possibly, decreased excitability (Figure 2F).

Cortical Synaptic Transmission

The paired-pulse ratio of AMPA receptor-mediated EPSCs recorded in L5 CPNs was significantly higher in Tshz3-pnCxKO CPNs compared with control CPNs (Figure 3A), suggesting a decreased probability of AP-dependent glutamate release from L2/3 cortical neurons. In contrast, the paired-pulse ratio of GABAergic inhibitory postsynaptic currents was similar in both genotypes (Figure 3B). Concerning AP-independent spontaneous activity, the distribution of miniature EPSC interevent interval and amplitude, as well as the average EPSC and amplitude (Figure 3C), were similar in Tshz3-pnCxKO and control mice. Finally, the NMDA/AMPA ratio was also similar between control and mutant (0.69 ± 0.11, n = 22 vs. 0.51 ± 0.08, n = 20; p = .296, Mann-Whitney test).

Corticostratial Synaptic Transmission and Plasticity

In the mouse, the bulk of the corticostratal pathway is constituted by axons of L5 CPNs reaching the striatum around P3 to P4 and forming synapses from P10 onward (53). Their main targets are SPNs, which constitute >90% of the whole striatal neuronal population and do not express TSHZ3 (20). These facts and the implication of the corticostratal pathway in ASD (10)
make this circuit (Figure 4A) a valuable tool for investigating the functional consequences of Tshz3 loss in CNPs.

Striatal SNPs recorded from control (n = 16) and Tshz3-pnCxKO (n = 22) mice presented similar resting membrane potential and current–voltage relationship (not shown). Interestingly, the paired-pulse ratio was significantly higher in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice (Figure 4B), suggesting a decreased probability of AP-dependent glutamate release from LS CNPs. Conversely, miniature EPSC parameters were not changed in Tshz3-pnCxKO compared with control mice (Figure 4C). Furthermore, in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice, the NMDA/AMPA ratio was significantly increased (Figure 4D).

Concerning synaptic plasticity, long-term potentiation (LTP) was present in both control and mutant mice (Figure 5A). Conversely, long-term depression (LTD) was absent in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice and was even reversed as a transient potentiation (Figure 5B). Interestingly, the blockade of NMDA receptors by AP-5 (40 μM) partially recovered LTD and abolished the transient potentiation (Figure 5B), suggesting that the lack of LTD could be due, at least in part, to increased NMDA receptor–mediated signaling.

ASD-Relevant Behavior

Tshz3-pnCxKO mice displayed more stereotyped behaviors than control mice: they buried more marbles and dipped more repeatedly in the hole board (Figure 6A and Figure S7A, B in Supplement 1). Tshz3-pnCxKO mice showed reduced field of interest with smaller number of zone crossing in the open field (Figure 6B, C) and also had lower sociability and lower interest in social novelty, as revealed by the two-chamber test (Figure 6D–F). In addition, Tshz3-pnCxKO mice showed increased anxiety-like behavior: they avoided the central area more in the open field (Figure 6B, G), as well as the open arms of the elevated plus maze (Figure 6H). Mutant and control mice learned equally in the Morris water maze (see Supplement 1): neither the learning slopes nor the probe scores differed, and the adjusted p value (or false discovery rate) <.05 (Table S2H in Supplement 2). In this condition, 155 (43.4%) genes of 357 are associated with ASD, among which 13 (GRIN2A, GRIN2B, MIF, MYH6, MYH14, NDUFAL3, NOS1, PHGDH, PRR7, PURA, RFTN1, SYT2, VGF) encode for PSD proteins (Figure 7D; Table S2H–K in Supplement 2).

Genes Differentially Expressed in the Tshz3-pnCxKO Cerebral Cortex Are Strongly Associated With ASD

RNA sequencing, performed at P28 in the cortex of Tshz3-pnCxKO and control mice, identified 1025 differentially expressed genes (DEGs), among which 767 were upregulated and 258 downregulated (p < .05) (Table S2A in Supplement 2). A total of 993 of these DEGs have nonambiguous human orthologs (Table S2B in Supplement 2). GSEA showed consistent negative or positive enrichment of Gene Ontology terms associated with neurological and synaptic functions/pathways, as well as neurological disorders, such as ASD and Alzheimer’s disease (Figure 7A, B; Table S3A–X in Supplement 3). GSEA from the SynaptomeDB [http://metamodics.org/SynaptomeDB/index.php (43)] and from the G2C postsynaptic proteome dataset [http://www.genes2cognition.org/proteomics (44)] revealed positive enrichment of postsynaptic, presynaptic, and presynaptic active zone and negative enrichment for vesicle Gene Ontology terms (Figure 7C; Table S3L–O in Supplement 3). Interestingly, we found a strong enrichment for the NMDA receptor pathway, while few genes were related to the AMPA receptor pathway (Figure 7C). Of the 1025 DEGs, 173 (16.7%) encode for postsynaptic density (PSD) proteins from the adult mouse cerebral cortex, among which 167 have human orthologs (54) (Table S2B–D in Supplement 2). Interestingly, among these 167 proteins, 28 were identified as components of the DLG4, DLGAP1, and/or SHANK3 postsynaptic protein-interaction networks of the adult mouse cortex (55) (Table S2E in Supplement 2).

Last, of the 993 human orthologues, 741 (74.6%) are involved in brain and nervous system disorders. Among these 741 genes, 489 (66%) are known or proposed to be involved in ASD (Table S2F, G in Supplement 2). Note that the percentage of ASD-associated genes remains high when restricting the analysis to the 357 human orthologues of the 382 DEGs having an absolute value of log2 fold change >0.5 and the adjusted p value (or false discovery rate) <.05 (Table S2H in Supplement 2). In this condition, 155 (43.4%) genes of 357 are associated with ASD, among which TSHZ3 has different regulatory functions at prenatal versus postnatal stages. Interestingly, postnatal Tshz3 loss also clearly leads to abnormal expression of 173 genes of the interaction network in terms of human brain diseases: notably, in both cases, ASD first, and schizophrenia second, are the most represented pathologies associated to these genes. Consistently, we show here that Tshz3-pnCxKO mice display the whole set of ASD-like behavioral abnormalities, namely social interaction deficits, restricted fields of interest, and stereotypes, similarly to Tshz3−/− mice, a model mimicking the human pathology (20). Therefore, the alteration of different transcriptional programs resulting from Tshz3 deficiency at embryonic or postnatal stages converges into a similar ASD phenotype. These data raise the issue of the contribution of postnatal events to the ASD phenotype of Tshz3−/− mice and call for future rescue experiments to test the hypothesis of an
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early postnatal therapeutic window for the ASD-like syndrome linked to TSHZ3 haploinsufficiency. Mutations linked to ASD induce structural and functional changes in brain circuitry, including spine morphology/density, synaptic transmission, and plasticity (58), strongly involving the corticostriatal circuitry (7,10,59), suggesting that this pathway constitutes a main target for studying brain dysfunctions associated to this pathology. Accordingly, we reported functional abnormalities in the corticostriatal pathway associated with the ASD-related phenotype in Tshz3<sup>+/−</sup> mice (20). Consistently, here, we found that cortical AP-dependent glutamate release is significantly reduced in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice and that L5 CPNs have decreased spine density, which is usually associated to diminished synaptic activity (60), as well as slightly reduced excitability. L2/3 and L5 neurons normally express TSHZ3, and thus these changes could be attributed to a “direct” effect of postnatal Tshz3 loss on their maturation and functioning as well as on the establishment of their synaptic network. In turn, the reduced AP-dependent glutamate release in the striatum could be interpreted as a consequence of the above-mentioned modifications at cortical level. In parallel, the increased NMDA/AMPA ratio measured in striatal SPNs could be interpreted as a compensatory mechanism: NMDA receptor signaling, which is crucial for synaptic plasticity (61), could be enhanced to compensate for the lower corticostriatal input. In this respect, the abnormal corticostriatal LTD reported here is particularly striking and fitting: LTD in the striatum can be induced in conditions limiting NMDA receptor activation; conversely, LTP induction requires their full activation (33,62–68). In this context, the exacerbated NMDA receptor-mediated signaling might lead to the observed loss of LTD and the transient LTP-like phenomenon; the partial recovery of LTD by NMDA receptor blockade strongly supports this hypothesis. Alternatively, or concomitantly, LTD loss could be attributed to an occlusion effect: as basal corticostriatal synaptic transmission is downregulated, it cannot be further depressed. Interestingly, changes in corticostriatal function have been evidenced in several mouse models of ASD (17–20). These alterations are heterogeneous, possibly owing to the different models, experimental protocols, and genetic backgrounds. However, they all strongly suggest that altered corticostriatal synaptic transmission/plasticity is a hallmark of ASD.

Long-lasting changes of synaptic strength can reinforce (LTP) or depress (LTD) specific neural circuits, thus gating salient information while suppressing unwanted ones to optimize behavioral responses (69). If, as in our case, one of the two forms of plasticity is altered or absent, these processes would be unpaired, contributing to the observed behavioral abnormalities. Whereas the molecular and anatomofunctional defects in corticostriatal circuitry could underlie at least part of the ASD-like features of Tshz3-pnCxKO mice, other brain circuits and structures might also be involved, such as those involving the medial prefrontal cortex and the basolateral amygdala (70), as TSHZ3 and CaMKIIalpha are expressed there (20,21,71). In agreement with the very low Tshz3 expression in the hippocampus (21), Tshz3-pnCxKO mice have no memory deficit.

Overall, the above-mentioned molecular, functional, and morphological changes in CPNs due to Tshz3 loss further support the current idea that ASD can be considered as a synaptopathy (70,72). Here, we show that several DEGs in Tshz3-pnCxKO mice are actually involved in glutamatergic synaptic transmission at both pre- and postsynaptic level, including genes involved in NMDA receptor signaling pathway, PSD-95, and SH3 and multiple ankyrin repeat domains protein complex. There is increasing evidence that NMDA receptor-dependent signaling pathway is involved not only in ASD, but also in Alzheimer’s disease, while AMPA receptor-mediated signaling is relatively spared (73), leading to the hypothesis that TSHZ3-related ASD can be considered as a synaptopathy linked to NMDA receptor pathway abnormalities.

Here, we demonstrate that Tshz3 plays an essential role in the cortex and in corticostriatal circuitry during postnatal development, which is different from that played at prenatal stages in terms of gene expression modulation. This supports the position of TSHZ3 as a critical neurodevelopmental regulator participating at differential age-related processes of gene transcription and confirms its role as an ASD-risk gene, providing new ASD models in rodents and pointing to dysfunctional corticostriatal circuitry as a substrate for this group of neurodevelopmental disorders.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DISCLOSURES**

This work was supported by the French National Research Agency (ANR) “TSHZ3inASD” project Grant No. ANR-17-CE16-0030-01 (to LF, LX-LG, and BH); a grant from the Fédération pour la Recherche sur le Cerveau (FRC) (to LF); the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM), and Aix Marseille Univ; “Investments for the Future” program (France-Bioimaging) Grant No. ANR-10-INBS-04-01 (to the imaging platform of the IBDM); and “France Génomique” national infrastructure “Investissement d’Avenir” Grant No. ANR-10-INSB-08-09 (to DS and ED). IBDM and LPG are affiliated with Marseille NeuroSchool, a graduate school supported by the A*MIDEX foundation and the French ANR funded by the French Government “Investissements d’Avenir” program (nEURo*AMU, ANR-17-EURE-0029 grant).

**Figure 7.** Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA) enrichment. (A) Positive and (B) negative GSEA enrichment of the Gene Ontology category “Biological Process” using the preranked Tshz3 gene list. The normalized enriched score (NES) value from the gene set enrichment is shown. Red color indicates neuron-related terms, orange color designates kidney-related terms, and all other terms are shown in light blue. (C) Network of GSEA enrichments of different synaptome areas and postsynaptic neurotransmitter pathways. The color of the nodes represents the −log<sub>10</sub> of the p value (pval) from GSEA for each term, the size of the nodes roughly indicates the total number of genes found for each term based on the formula [number of genes/10]<sup>−</sup> × 2. The strength of the interactions (line thickness) indicates shared genes between the terms. (D) Histogram showing the most represented human brain and nervous system pathologies associated with the 357 human orthologs of the 382 Tshz3-regulated differentially expressed genes (DEGs) with log<sub>2</sub> fold change >0.5 and p value (or false discovery rate) <.05. Each gene is scored on the basis of the number of relevant publications that associate it with a pathology. Scores were given as follows: 1, one publication; 2, two publications; 3, >2 publications. AMPAR, alpha-amino-3-hydroxy-5-methyl-4-isoxazole propionic acid receptor; ASD, autism spectrum disorder; GF, growth factor; mGlur5, metabotropic glutamate receptor 5; NADH, nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide; NADP, nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate; ncRNA, noncoding RNA; NMDAR, N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor; PSD, postsynaptic density; PSP, postsynaptic potential.
We wish to thank Dr. Francis Castet and Dr. Jean-Pierre Kessler (IBDM) for, respectively, performing some experiments and his kind advice on NMDA receptors.

The authors report no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

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Received Oct 30, 2018; revised and accepted Mar 7, 2019.

Supplementary material cited in this article is available online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.03.974.

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Postnatal Tshz3 Loss in Cortex Leads to ASD


