

The ANTsX ecosystem for quantitative biological and medical imaging

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22 Abstract

23 The Advanced Normalizations Tools ecosystem, known as ANTsX, consists of multiple open-
24 source software libraries which house top-performing algorithms used worldwide by scientific
25 and research communities for processing and analyzing biological and medical imaging data.
26 The base software library, ANTs, is built upon, and contributes to, the NIH-sponsored
27 Insight Toolkit. Founded in 2008 with the highly regarded Symmetric Normalization image
28 registration framework, the ANTs library has since grown to include additional functionality.
29 Recent enhancements include statistical, visualization, and deep learning capabilities through
30 interfacing with both the R statistical project (ANTsR) and Python (ANTsPy). Additionally,
31 the corresponding deep learning extensions ANTsRNet and ANTsPyNet (built on the popular
32 TensorFlow/Keras libraries) contain several popular network architectures and trained models
33 for specific applications. One such comprehensive application is a deep learning analog
34 for generating cortical thickness data from structural T1-weighted brain MRI, both cross-
35 sectionally and longitudinally. These pipelines significantly improve computational efficiency
36 and provide comparable-to-superior accuracy over multiple criteria relative to the existing
37 ANTs workflows and simultaneously illustrate the importance of the comprehensive ANTsX
38 approach as a framework for medical image analysis.

³⁹ **The ANTsX ecosystem: A brief overview**

⁴⁰ **Image registration origins**

⁴¹ The Advanced Normalization Tools (ANTs) is a state-of-the-art, open-source software toolkit
⁴² for image registration, segmentation, and other functionality for comprehensive biological
⁴³ and medical image analysis. Historically, ANTs is rooted in advanced image registration
⁴⁴ techniques which have been at the forefront of the field due to seminal contributions that
⁴⁵ date back to the original elastic matching method of Bajcsy and co-investigators.^{54,55,59}
⁴⁶ Various independent platforms have been used to evaluate ANTs tools since their early
⁴⁷ development. In a landmark paper,⁶⁵ the authors reported an extensive evaluation using
⁴⁸ multiple neuroimaging datasets analyzed by fourteen different registration tools, including
⁴⁹ the Symmetric Normalization (SyN) algorithm,⁶⁰ and found that “ART, SyN, IRTK, and
⁵⁰ SPM’s DARTEL Toolbox gave the best results according to overlap and distance measures,
⁵¹ with ART and SyN delivering the most consistently high accuracy across subjects and label
⁵² sets.” Participation in other independent competitions^{62,69} provided additional evidence of the
⁵³ utility of ANTs registration and other tools.^{13,14,42} Despite the extremely significant potential
⁵⁴ of deep learning for image registration algorithmic development,⁴¹ ANTs registration tools
⁵⁵ continue to find application in the various biomedical imaging research communities.

⁵⁶ **Current developments**

⁵⁷ Since its inception, though, ANTs has expanded significantly beyond its image registration
⁵⁸ origins. Other core contributions include template building,⁶⁴ segmentation,⁶⁸ image pre-
⁵⁹ processing (e.g., bias correction⁵² and denoising),⁵⁶ joint label fusion,^{53,63} and brain cortical
⁶⁰ thickness estimation^{57,66} (cf Table 1). Additionally, ANTs has been integrated into multiple,
⁶¹ publicly available workflows such as fMRIprep⁵⁰ and the Spinal Cord Toolbox.⁴⁹ Frequently
⁶² used ANTs pipelines, such as cortical thickness estimation,⁶⁶ have been integrated into Docker
⁶³ containers and packaged as Brain Imaging Data Structure (BIDS)⁴⁸ and FlyWheel applica-
⁶⁴ tions (i.e., “gears’ ’). It has also been independently ported for various platforms including
⁶⁵ Neurodebian⁴⁷ (Debian OS), Neuroconductor⁴⁶ (the R statistical project), and Nipype⁴⁵

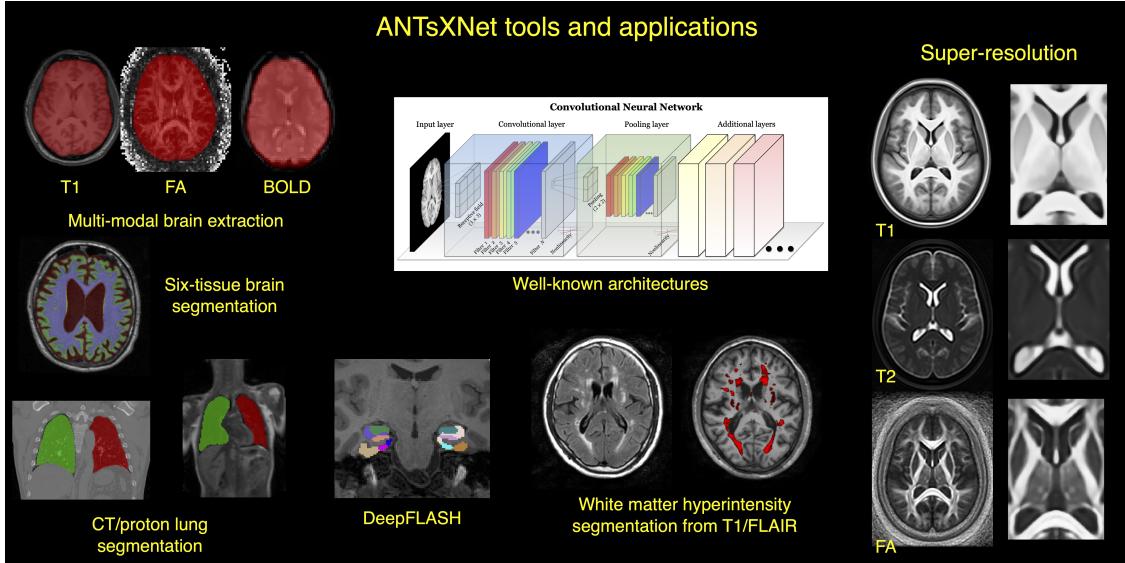


Figure 1: An illustration of the tools and applications available as part of the ANTsRNet and ANTsPyNet deep learning toolkits. Both libraries take advantage of ANTs functionality through their respective language interfaces—ANTsR (R) and ANTsPy (Python). Building on the Keras/TensorFlow language, both libraries standardize popular network architectures within the ANTs ecosystem and are cross-compatible. These networks are used to train models and weights for such applications as brain extraction which are then disseminated to the public.

66 (Python). Additionally, other widely used software, such as FreeSurfer,⁶¹ have incorporated
 67 well-performing and complementary ANTs components^{52,56} into their own libraries. According
 68 to GitHub, recent unique “clones” have averaged 34 per day with the total number of clones
 69 being approximately twice that many. 50 unique contributors to the ANTs library have made
 70 a total of over 4500 commits. Additional insights into usage can be viewed at the ANTs
 71 GitHub website.

72 Over the course of its development, ANTs has been extended to complementary frameworks
 73 resulting in the Python- and R-based ANTsPy and ANTsR toolkits, respectively. These
 74 ANTs-based packages interface with extremely popular, high-level, open-source programming
 75 platforms which have significantly increased the user base of ANTs. The rapidly rising
 76 popularity of deep learning motivated further recent enhancement of ANTs and its extensions.
 77 Despite the existence of an abundance of online innovation and code for deep learning
 78 algorithms, much of it is disorganized and lacks a uniformity in structure and external data
 79 interfaces which would facilitate greater uptake. With this in mind, ANTsR spawned the deep

Functionality	Citations
SyN registration ⁵	2616
bias field correction ¹⁶	2188
ANTs registration evaluation ⁶	2013
joint label fusion ¹⁸	669
template generation ¹⁴	423
cortical thickness: implementation ²⁰	321
MAP-MRF segmentation ¹⁵	319
ITK integration ¹²	250
cortical thickness: theory ¹⁹	180

Table 1: The significance of core ANTs tools in terms of their number of citations (from October 17, 2020).

80 learning ANTsRNet package³² which is a growing Keras/TensorFlow-based library of popular
 81 deep learning architectures and applications specifically geared towards medical imaging.
 82 Analogously, ANTsPyNet is an additional ANTsX complement to ANTsPy. Both, which we
 83 collectively refer to as “ANTsXNet”, are co-developed so as to ensure cross-compatibility
 84 such that training performed in one library is readily accessible by the other library. In
 85 addition to a variety of popular network architectures (which are implemented in both 2-D
 86 and 3-D), ANTsXNet contains a host of functionality for medical image analysis that have
 87 been developed in-house and collected from other open-source projects. For example, an
 88 extremely popular ANTsXNet application is a multi-modal brain extraction tool that uses
 89 different variants of the popular U-net⁴⁴ architecture for segmenting the brain in multiple
 90 modalities. These modalities include conventional T1-weighted structural MRI as well as
 91 T2-weighted MRI, FLAIR, fractional anisotropy, and BOLD data. Demographic specialization
 92 also includes infant T1-weighted and/or T2-weighted MRI. Additionally, we have included
 93 other models and weights into our libraries such as a recent BrainAGE estimation model,²³
 94 based on > 14,000 individuals; HippMapp3r,⁴³ a hippocampal segmentation tool; the winning
 95 entry of the MICCAI 2017 white matter hyperintensity segmentation competition;⁴⁰ MRI
 96 super resolution using deep back-projection networks;²² and NoBrainer, a T1-weighted brain
 97 extraction approach based on FreeSurfer (see Figure 1).

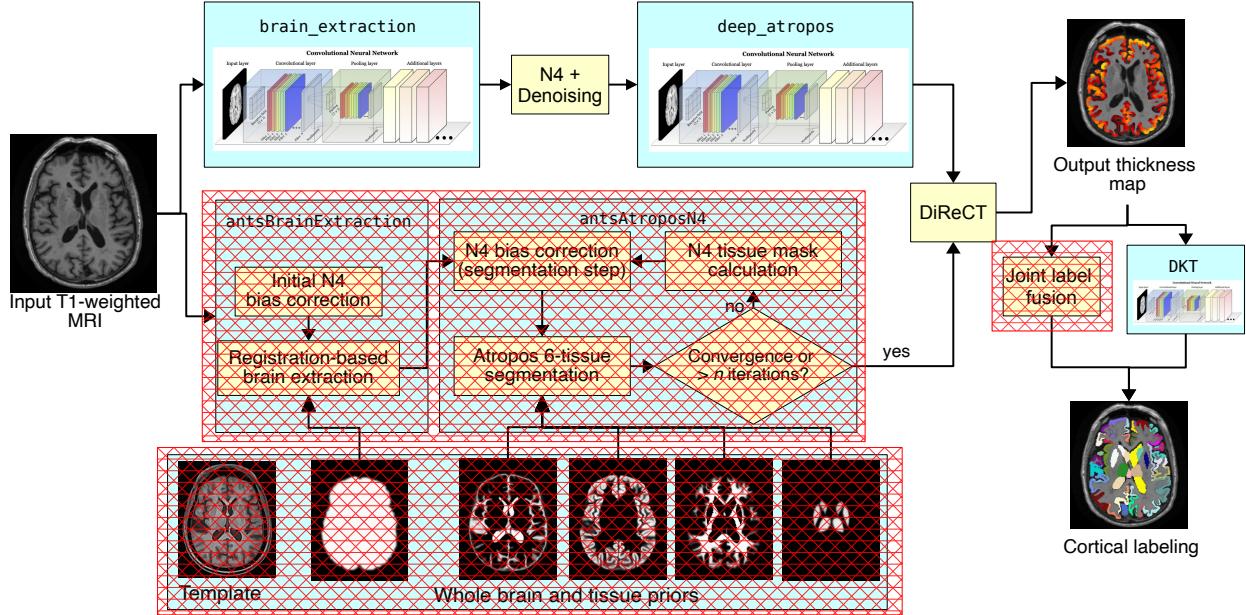


Figure 2: Illustration of the ANTsXNet cortical thickness pipeline and the relationship to its traditional ANTs analog. The hash-designated sections denote pipeline steps which have been obviated by the deep learning approach. These include template-based brain extraction, template-based n -tissue segmentation, and joint label fusion for cortical labeling. In our prior work, execution time of the thickness pipeline was dominated by registration. In the deep version of the pipeline, it is dominated by DiReCT. However, we note that registration and DiReCT execute much more quickly than in the past in part due to major improvements in the underlying ITK multi-threading strategy.

98 The ANTsXNet cortical thickness pipeline

99 The most recent ANTsX innovation involves the development of deep learning analogs of
100 our popular ANTs cortical thickness cross-sectional⁶⁶ and longitudinal⁵¹ pipelines within
101 the ANTsXNet framework. Figure 2, adapted from our previous work,⁶⁶ illustrates some of
102 the major changes associated with the single-subject, cross-sectional pipeline. The resulting
103 improvement in efficiency derives primarily from eliminating deformable image registration
104 from the pipeline—a step which has historically been used to propagate prior, population-
105 based information (e.g., tissue maps) to individual subjects for such tasks as brain extraction⁵⁸
106 and tissue segmentation⁶⁸ which is now configured within the neural networks and trained
107 weights.

108 These structural MRI processing pipelines are currently available as open-source within the

¹⁰⁹ ANTsXNet libraries. Evaluations using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data are de-
¹¹⁰ scribed in subsequent sections and couched within the context of our previous publications.^{51,66}
¹¹¹ Related work has been recently reported by external groups^{38,39} and provides [a context for](#)
¹¹² comparison to motivate the utility of the ANTsX ecosystem.

¹¹³ Results

¹¹⁴ Cross-sectional performance evaluation

1) caudal anterior cingulate (cACC)	17) pars orbitalis (pORB)
2) caudal middle frontal (cMFG)	18) pars triangularis (pTRI)
3) cuneus (CUN)	19) pericalcarine (periCAL)
4) entorhinal (ENT)	20) postcentral (postC)
5) fusiform (FUS)	21) posterior cingulate (PCC)
6) inferior parietal (IPL)	22) precentral (preC)
7) inferior temporal (ITG)	23) precuneus (PCUN)
8) isthmus cingulate (iCC)	24) rostral anterior cingulate (rACC)
9) lateral occipital (LOG)	25) rostral middle frontal (rMFG)
10) lateral orbitofrontal (LOF)	26) superior frontal (SFG)
11) lingual (LING)	27) superior parietal (SPL)
12) medial orbitofrontal (MOF)	28) superior temporal (STG)
13) middle temporal (MTG)	29) supramarginal (SMAR)
14) parahippocampal (PARH)	30) transverse temporal (TT)
15) paracentral (paraC)	31) insula (INS)
16) pars opercularis (pOPER)	

Table 2: The 31 cortical labels (per hemisphere) of the Desikan-Killiany-Tourville atlas. The ROI abbreviations from the R `brainGraph` package are given in parentheses and used in later figures.

¹¹⁵ Due to the absence of ground-truth, we utilize the evaluation strategy from our previous
¹¹⁶ work⁶⁶ where we used cross-validation to build and compare age prediction models from
¹¹⁷ data derived from both the proposed ANTsXNet pipeline and the established ANTs pipeline.
¹¹⁸ Specifically, we use “age” as a well-known and widely-available demographic correlate of
¹¹⁹ cortical thickness³⁰ and quantify the predictive capabilities of corresponding random forest
¹²⁰ classifiers¹⁹ of the form:

$$AGE \sim VOLUME + GENDER + \sum_{i=1}^{62} T(DKT_i) \quad (1)$$

121 with covariates *GENDER* and *VOLUME* (i.e., total intracranial volume). $T(DKT_i)$ is the
 122 average thickness value in the i^{th} Desikan-Killiany-Tourville (DKT) region³⁵ (cf Table 2).
 123 Root mean square error (RMSE) between the actual and predicted ages are the quantity
 124 used for comparative evaluation. As we have explained previously,⁶⁶ we find these evaluation
 125 measures to be much more useful than other commonly applied criteria as they are closer to
 126 assessing the actual utility of these thickness measurements as biomarkers for disease²¹ or
 127 growth. In recent work³⁹ the authors employ correlation with FreeSurfer thickness values as
 128 the primary evaluation for assessing relative performance with ANTs cortical thickness.⁶⁶
 129 This evaluation, unfortunately, is fundamentally flawed in that it is a prime example of a
 130 type of circularity analysis²⁹ whereby data selection is driven by the same criteria used to
 131 evaluate performance. Specifically, the underlying DeepSCAN network used for the tissue
 132 segmentation step employs training based on FreeSurfer results which directly influences
 133 thickness values as thickness/segmentation are highly correlated and vary characteristically
 134 between software packages. Relative performance with ANTs thickness (which does not use
 135 FreeSurfer for training) is then assessed by determining correlations with FreeSurfer thickness
 136 values. Almost as problematic is their use of repeatability, which they confusingly label
 137 as “robustness,” as an additional ranking criterion. Repeatability evaluations should be
 138 contextualized within considerations such as the bias-variance tradeoff and quantified using
 139 relevant metrics, such as the intra-class correlation coefficient which takes into account both
 140 inter- and intra-observer variability.

141 In addition to the training data listed above, to ensure generalizability, we also compared
 142 performance using the SRPB data set¹⁵ comprising over 1600 participants from 12 sites. Note
 143 that we recognize that we are processing a portion of the evaluation data through certain
 144 components of the proposed deep learning-based pipeline that were used to train the same
 145 pipeline components. Although this does not provide evidence for generalizability (which is
 146 why we include the much larger SRPB data set), it is still interesting to examine the results
 147 since, in this case, the deep learning training can be considered a type of noise reduction on

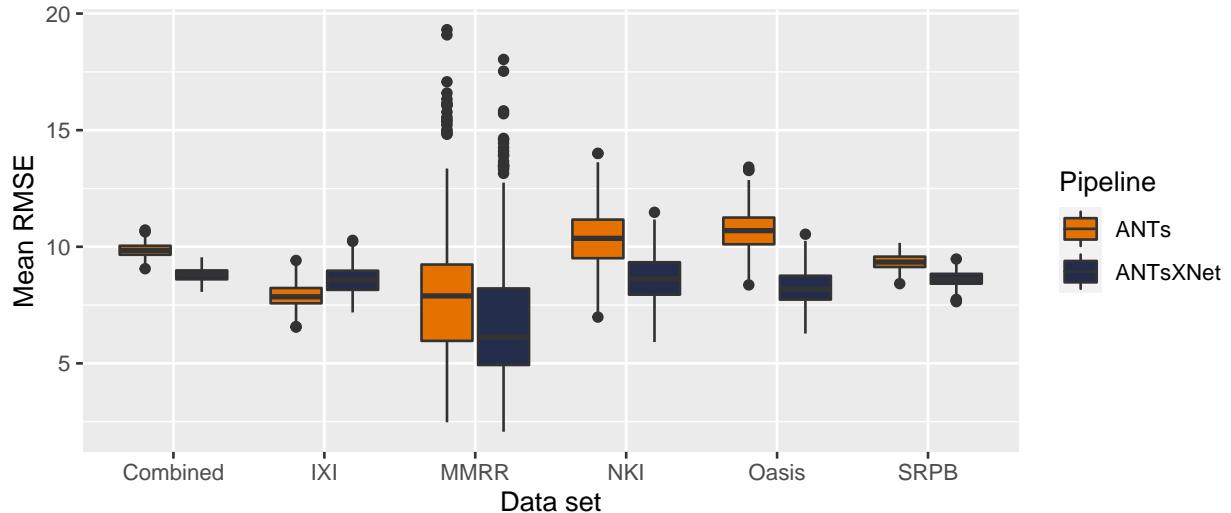


Figure 3: Distribution of mean RMSE values (500 permutations) for age prediction across the different data sets between the traditional ANTs and deep learning-based ANTsXNet pipelines. Total mean values are as follows: Combined—9.3 years (ANTs) and 8.2 years (ANTsXNet); IXI—7.9 years (ANTs) and 8.6 years (ANTsXNet); MMRR—7.9 years (ANTs) and 7.6 years (ANTsXNet); NKI—8.7 years (ANTs) and 7.9 years (ANTsXNet); OASIS—9.2 years (ANTs) and 8.0 years (ANTsXNet); and SRPB—9.2 years (ANTs) and 8.1 years (ANTsXNet).

148 the final results. It should be noted that training did not use age prediction (or any other
 149 evaluation or related measure) as a criterion to be optimized during network model training
 150 (i.e., circular analysis).²⁹

151 The results are shown in Figure 3 where we used cross-validation with 500 permutations
 152 per model per data set (including a “combined” set) and an 80/20 training/testing split.
 153 The ANTsXNet deep learning pipeline outperformed the classical pipeline⁶⁶ in terms of age
 154 prediction in all data sets except for IXI. This also includes the cross-validation iteration
 155 where all data sets were combined. Additionally, repeatability assessment on [the regional](#)
 156 [cortical thickness values of the](#) MMRR data set yielded ICC values (“average random rater”)
 157 of 0.99 for both pipelines.

158 [A comparative illustration of regional thickness measurements between the ANTs and](#)
 159 [ANTsXNet pipelines is provided in Figure 4 for three different ages spanning the lifespan.](#)
 160 [Linear models of the form](#)

$$T(DKT_i) \sim GENDER + AGE \quad (2)$$

were created for each of the 62 DKT regions for each pipeline. These models were then used to predict thickness values for each gender at ages of 25 years, 50 years, and 75 years and subsequently plotted relative to the absolute maximum predicted thickness value (ANTs: right entorhinal cortex at 25 years, male). Although there appear to be systematic differences between specific regional predicted thickness values (e.g., $T(ENT)_{ANTs} > T(ENT)_{ANTsXNet}$, $T(pORB)_{ANTs} < T(pORB)_{ANTsXNet}$), a pairwise t-test evidenced no statistically significant difference between the predicted thickness values of the two pipelines.

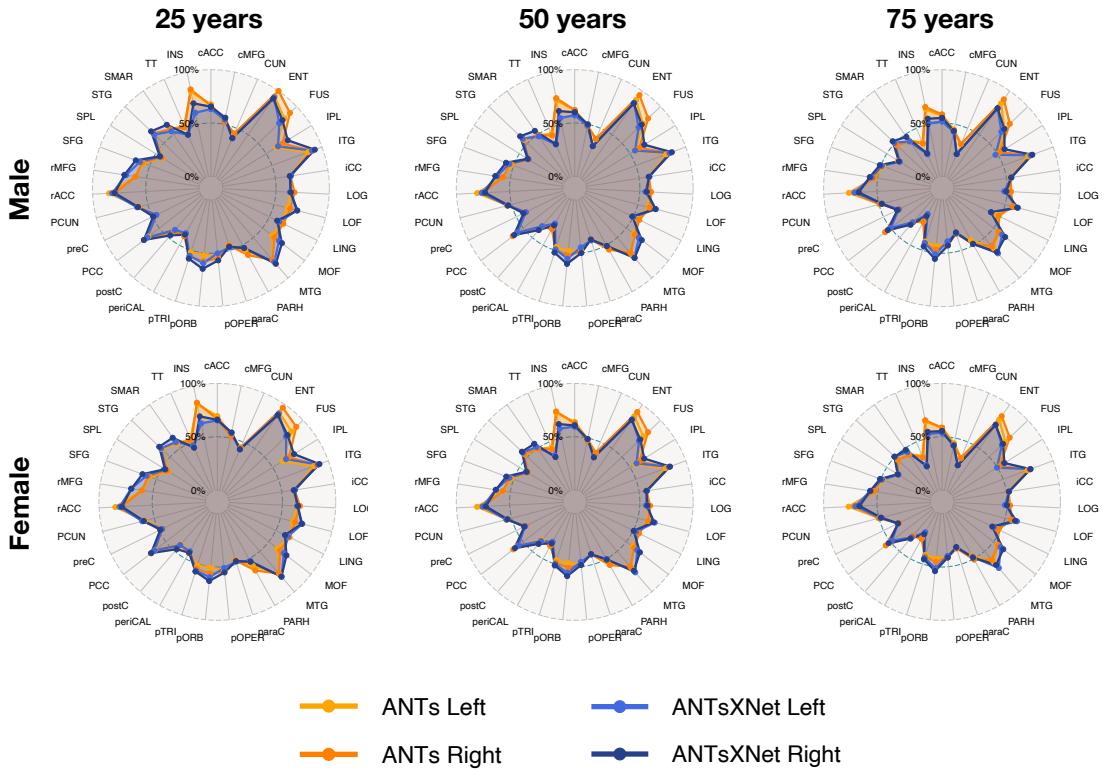
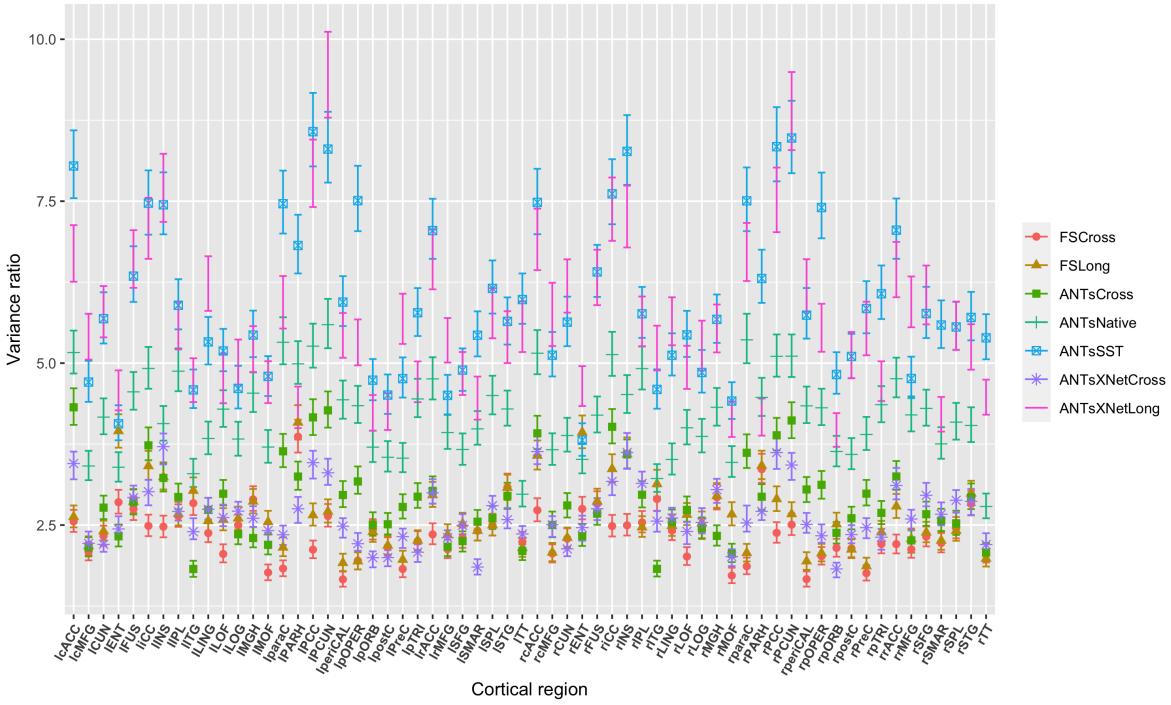
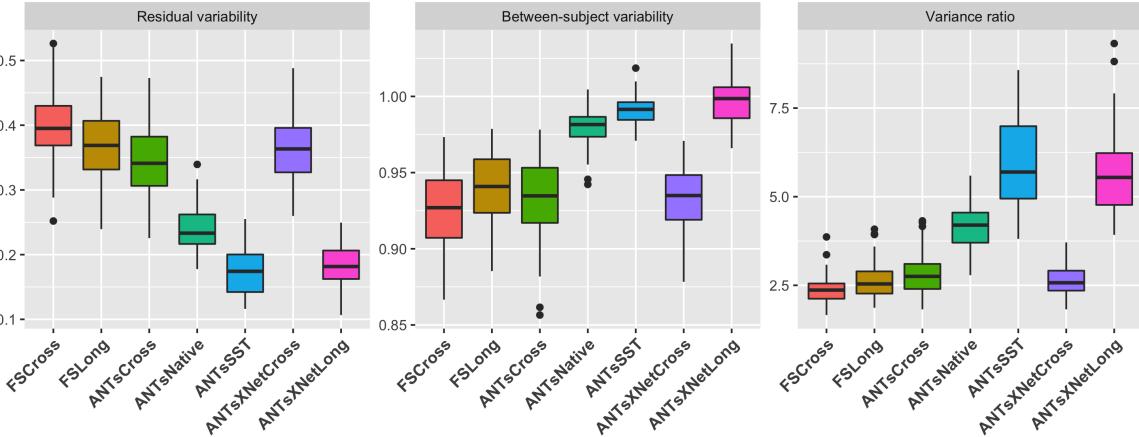


Figure 4: Radar plots enabling comparison of relative thickness values between the ANTs and ANTsXNet cortical thickness pipelines at three different ages sampling the life span. See Table 2 for region abbreviations.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5: Performance over longitudinal data as determined by the variance ratio. (a) Region-specific 95% confidence intervals of the variance ratio showing the superior performance of the longitudinally tailored ANTsX-based pipelines, including ANTsSST and ANTsXNetLong. (b) Residual variability, between subject, and variance ratio values per pipeline over all DKT regions.

168 Longitudinal performance evaluation

169 Given the excellent performance and superior computational efficiency of the proposed
 170 ANTsXNet pipeline for cross-sectional data, we evaluated its performance on longitudinal

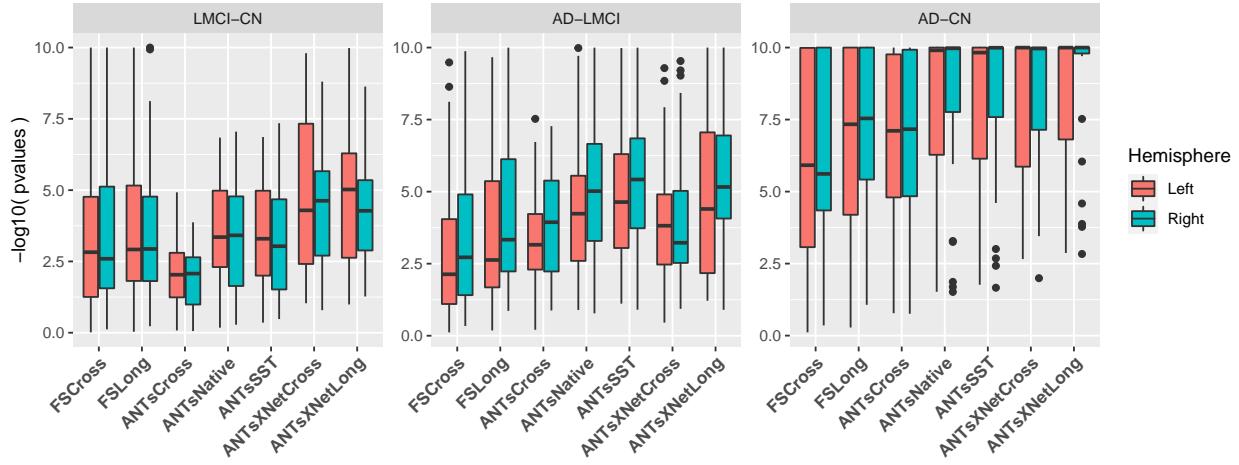


Figure 6: Measures for the supervised evaluation strategy where log p-values for diagnostic differentiation of LMCI-CN, AD-LMCI, and AD-CN subjects are plotted for all pipelines over all DKT regions.

171 data using the longitudinally-specific evaluation strategy and data we employed with the
 172 introduction of the longitudinal version of the ANTs cortical thickness pipeline.⁵¹ We also
 173 evaluated an ANTsXNet-based pipeline tailored specifically for longitudinal data. In this
 174 variant, an SST is generated and processed using the previously described ANTsXNet cross-
 175 sectional pipeline which yields tissue spatial priors. These spatial priors are used in our
 176 traditional brain segmentation approach⁶⁸. The computational efficiency of this variant is
 177 also significantly improved, in part, due to the elimination of the costly SST prior generation
 178 which uses multiple registrations combined with joint label fusion.⁵³

179 The ADNI-1 data used for our longitudinal performance evaluation⁵¹ consists of over 600
 180 subjects (197 cognitive normals, 324 LMCI subjects, and 142 AD subjects) with one or
 181 more follow-up image acquisition sessions every 6 months (up to 36 months) for a total
 182 of over 2500 images. In addition to the ANTsXNet pipelines (“ANTsXNetCross” and
 183 “ANTsXNetLong”) for the current evaluation, our previous work included the FreeSurfer⁶¹
 184 cross-sectional (“FSCross”) and longitudinal (“FSLong”) streams, the ANTs cross-sectional
 185 pipeline (“ANTsCross”) in addition to two longitudinal ANTs-based variants (“ANTsNative”
 186 and “ANTsSST”). Two evaluation measurements, one unsupervised and one supervised, were
 187 used to assess comparative performance between all seven pipelines. We add the results of
 188 the ANTsXNet pipeline cross-sectional and longitudinal evaluations in relation to these other

¹⁸⁹ pipelines to provide a comprehensive overview of relative performance.

First, linear mixed-effects (LME)²⁰ modeling was used to quantify between-subject and residual variabilities, the ratio of which provides an estimate of the effectiveness of a given biomarker for distinguishing between subpopulations. In order to assess this criteria while accounting for changes that may occur through the passage of time, we used the following Bayesian LME model:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij}^k &\sim N(\alpha_i^k + \beta_i^k t_{ij}, \sigma_k^2) \\ \alpha_i^k &\sim N(\alpha_0^k, \tau_k^2) \quad \beta_i^k \sim N(\beta_0^k, \rho_k^2) \\ \alpha_0^k, \beta_0^k &\sim N(0, 10) \quad \sigma_k, \tau_k, \rho_k \sim \text{Cauchy}^+(0, 5) \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where Y_{ij}^k denotes the i^{th} individual's cortical thickness measurement corresponding to the k^{th} region of interest at the time point indexed by j and specification of variance priors to half-Cauchy distributions reflects commonly accepted best practice in the context of hierarchical models.²⁸ The ratio of interest, r^k , per region of the between-subject variability, τ_k , and residual variability, σ_k is

$$r^k = \frac{\tau_k}{\sigma_k}, k = 1, \dots, 62 \tag{4}$$

¹⁹⁰ where the posterior distribution of r_k was summarized via the posterior median.

Second, the supervised evaluation employed Tukey post-hoc analyses with false discovery rate (FDR) adjustment to test the significance of the LMCI-CN, AD-LMCI, and AD-CN diagnostic contrasts. This is provided by the following LME model

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta Y &\sim Y_{bl} + AGE_{bl} + ICV_{bl} + APOE_{bl} + GENDER + DIAGNOSIS_{bl} \\ &+ VISIT : DIAGNOSIS_{bl} + (1|ID) + (1|SITE). \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

¹⁹¹ Here, ΔY is the change in thickness of the k^{th} DKT region from baseline (bl) thickness
¹⁹² Y_{bl} with random intercepts for both the individual subject (ID) and the acquisition site.
¹⁹³ The subject-specific covariates AGE , $APOE$ status, $GENDER$, $DIAGNOSIS$, ICV , and

¹⁹⁴ *VISIT* were taken directly from the ADNIMERGE package.

¹⁹⁵ Results for all pipelines with respect to the longitudinal evaluation criteria are shown in
¹⁹⁶ Figures 5 and 6. Figure 5(a) provides the 95% confidence intervals of the variance ratio for
¹⁹⁷ all 62 regions of the DKT cortical labeling where ANTsSST consistently performs best with
¹⁹⁸ ANTsXNetLong also performing well. These quantities are summarized in Figure 5(b). The
¹⁹⁹ second evaluation criteria compares diagnostic differentiation via LMEs. Log p-values are
²⁰⁰ provided in Figure 6 which demonstrate excellent LMCI-CN and AD-CN differentiation for
²⁰¹ both deep learning pipelines.

²⁰² Discussion

²⁰³ The ANTsX software ecosystem provides a comprehensive framework for quantitative biological
²⁰⁴ and medical imaging. Although ANTs, the original core of ANTsX, is still at the forefront
²⁰⁵ of image registration technology, it has moved significantly beyond its image registration
²⁰⁶ origins. This expansion is not confined to technical contributions (of which there are many)
²⁰⁷ but also consists of facilitating access to a wide range of users who can use ANTsX tools
²⁰⁸ (whether through bash, Python, or R scripting) to construct tailored pipelines for their own
²⁰⁹ studies or to take advantage of our pre-fabricated pipelines. And given the open-source
²¹⁰ nature of the ANTsX software, usage is not limited, for example, to non-commercial use—a
²¹¹ common constraint characteristic of other packages such as the FMRIB Software Library
²¹² (<https://fsl.fmrib.ox.ac.uk/fsl/fslwiki/Licence>).

²¹³ One of our most widely used pipelines is the estimation of cortical thickness from neuroimaging.
²¹⁴ This is understandable given the widespread usage of regional cortical thickness as a
²¹⁵ biomarker for developmental or pathological trajectories of the brain. In this work, we used
²¹⁶ this well-vetted ANTs tool to provide training data for producing alternative variants which
²¹⁷ leverage deep learning for improved computational efficiency and also provides superior performance
²¹⁸ with respect to previously proposed evaluation measures for both cross-sectional⁶⁶ and
²¹⁹ longitudinal scenarios.⁵¹ In addition to providing the tools which generated the original training
²²⁰ data for the proposed ANTsXNet pipeline, the ANTsX ecosystem provides a full-featured

221 platform for the additional steps such as preprocessing (ANTsR/ANTsPy); data augmentation
222 (ANTsR/ANTsPy); network construction and training (ANTsRNet/ANTsPyNet); and
223 visualization and statistical analysis of the results (ANTsR/ANTsPy).

224 It is the comprehensiveness of ANTsX that provides several advantages over much of the
225 deep learning work that is currently taking place in medical imaging. In other words, various
226 steps in the deep learning training processing (e.g., data augmentation, preprocessing) can all
227 be performed within the same ecosystem where such important details as header information
228 for image geometry are treated the same. In contrast, related work³⁹ described and evaluated
229 a similar thickness measurement pipeline. However, due to the lack of a complete processing
230 and analysis framework, training data was generated using the FreeSurfer stream, deep
231 learning-based brain segmentation employed DeepSCAN²⁷ (in-house software), and cortical
232 thickness estimation⁵⁷ was generated using the ANTs toolkit. The interested researcher must
233 ensure the consistency of the input/output interface between packages (a task for which the
234 Nipype development team is quite familiar.)

235 Although potentially advantageous in terms of such issues as computational efficiency and
236 other performance measures, there are a number of limitations associated with the ANTsXNet
237 pipeline that should be mentioned both to guide potential users and possibly motivate future
238 related research. As is the case with many deep learning models, usage is restricted based on
239 training data. For example, much of the publicly available brain data has been anonymized
240 through various defacing protocols. That is certainly the case with the training data used for
241 the ANTsXNet pipeline which has consequences specific to the brain extraction step which
242 could lead to poor performance. We are currently aware of this issue and have provided
243 a temporary workaround while simultaneously resuming training on whole head data to
244 mitigate this issue. Related, although the ANTsXNet pipeline performs relatively well as
245 assessed across lifespan data, performance might be hampered for specific age ranges (e.g.,
246 neonates), whereas the traditional ANTs cortical thickness pipeline is more flexible and might
247 provide better age-targeted performance. This is the subject of ongoing research. Additionally,
248 application of the ANTsXNet pipeline would be limited with high-resolution acquisitions.
249 Due to the heavy memory requirements associated with deep learning training, the utility of

any resolution greater than 1 mm isotropic would not be leveraged by the existing pipeline. However, there is a potential pipeline variation (akin to the longitudinal variant) that would be worth exploring where Deep Atropos is used only to provide the priors for a subsequent traditional Atropos segmentation on high-resolution data.

In terms of additional future work, the recent surge and utility of deep learning in medical image analysis has significantly guided the areas of active ANTsX development. As demonstrated in this work with our widely used cortical thickness pipelines, there are many potential benefits of deep learning analogs to existing ANTs tools as well as the development of new ones. Performance is mostly comparable-to-superior relative to existing pipelines depending on the evaluation metric. Specifically, the ANTsXNet cross-sectional pipeline does well for the age prediction performance framework and in terms of the ICC. Additionally, this pipeline performs relatively well for longitudinal ADNI data for disease differentiation but not so much in terms of the generic variance ratio criterion. However, for such longitudinal-specific studies, the ANTsXNet longitudinal variant performs well for both performance measures. We see possible additional longitudinal extensions incorporating subject ID and months as additional network inputs.

Methods

The original ANTs cortical thickness pipeline

The original ANTs cortical thickness pipeline⁶⁶ consists of the following steps:

- preprocessing: denoising⁵⁶ and bias correction;⁶⁷
- brain extraction;⁵⁸
- brain segmentation with spatial tissue priors⁶⁸ comprising the
 - cerebrospinal fluid (CSF),
 - gray matter (GM),
 - white matter (WM),
 - deep gray matter,
 - cerebellum, and

- 277 – brain stem; and
- 278 • cortical thickness estimation.⁵⁷
- 279 Our recent longitudinal variant⁵¹ incorporates an additional step involving the construction
280 of a single subject template (SST)⁶⁴ coupled with the generation of tissue spatial priors of
281 the SST for use with the processing of the individual time points as described above.
- 282 Although the resulting thickness maps are conducive to voxel-based³⁶ and related analyses³⁷,
283 here we employ the well-known Desikan-Killiany-Tourville (DKT)³⁵ labeling protocol (31
284 labels per hemisphere) to parcellate the cortex for averaging thickness values regionally (cf
285 Table 2). This allows us to 1) be consistent in our evaluation strategy for comparison with
286 our previous work^{51,66} and 2) leverage an additional deep learning-based substitution within
287 the proposed pipeline.

288 Overview of cortical thickness via ANTsXNet

289 The entire analysis/evaluation framework, from preprocessing to statistical analysis, is made
290 possible through the ANTsX ecosystem and simplified through the open-source R and
291 Python platforms. Preprocessing, image registration, and cortical thickness estimation are
292 all available through the ANTsPy and ANTsR libraries whereas the deep learning steps are
293 performed through networks constructed and trained via ANTsRNet/ANTsPyNet with data
294 augmentation strategies and other utilities built from ANTsR/ANTsPy functionality.

295 The brain extraction, brain segmentation, and DKT parcellation deep learning components
296 were trained using data derived from our previous work.⁶⁶ Specifically, the IXI,¹⁸ MMRR,³¹
297 NKI,¹⁷ and OASIS¹⁶ data sets, and the corresponding derived data, comprising over 1200
298 subjects from age 4 to 94, were used for network training. Brain extraction employs a
299 traditional 3-D U-net network⁴⁴ with whole brain, template-based data augmentation³²
300 whereas brain segmentation and DKT parcellation are processed via 3-D U-net networks with
301 attention gating³³ on image octant-based batches. [Additional network architecture details](#)
302 [are given below](#). We emphasize that a single model (as opposed to ensemble approaches
303 where multiple models are used to produce the final solution)⁴⁰ was created for each of these
304 steps and was used for all the experiments described below.

305 **Implementation**

306 Software, average DKT regional thickness values for all data sets, and the scripts to perform
307 both the analysis and obtain thickness values for a single subject (cross-sectionally or
308 longitudinally) are provided as open-source. Specifically, all the ANTsX libraries are hosted
309 on GitHub (<https://github.com/ANTsX>). The cross-sectional data and analysis code
310 are available as .csv files and R scripts at the GitHub repository dedicated to this paper
311 (<https://github.com/ntustison/PaperANTsX>) whereas the longitudinal data and evaluation
312 scripts are organized with the repository associated with our previous work⁵¹ (<https://github.com/ntustison/CrossLong>).
313

```
314 import ants
315 import antsPyNet
316
317 # ANTsPy/ANTsPyNet processing for subject IXI002-Guys-0828-T1
318 t1_file = "IXI002-Guys-0828-T1.nii.gz"
319 t1 = ants.image_read(t1_file)
320
321 # Atropos six-tissue segmentation
322 atropos = antsPyNet.deep_atropos(t1, do_preprocessing=True, verbose=True)
323
324 # Kelly Kapowski cortical thickness (combine Atropos WM and deep GM)
325 kk_segmentation = atropos['segmentation_image']
326 kk_segmentation[kk_segmentation == 4] = 3
327 kk_gray_matter = atropos['probability_images'][2]
328 kk_white_matter = atropos['probability_images'][3] + atropos['probability_images'][4]
329 kk = ants.kelly_kapowski(s=kk_segmentation, g=kk_gray_matter, w=kk_white_matter,
330                           its=45, r=0.025, m=1.5, x=0, verbose=1)
331
332 # Desikan-Killiany-Tourville labeling
333 dkt = antsPyNet.desikan_killiany_tourville_labeling(t1, do_preprocessing=True, verbose=True)
334
335 # DKT label propagation throughout the cortex
336 dkt_cortical_mask = ants.threshold_image(dkt, 1000, 3000, 1, 0)
337 dkt = dkt_cortical_mask * dkt
338 kk_mask = ants.threshold_image(kk, 0, 0, 0, 1)
339 dkt_propagated = ants.iMath(kk_mask, "PropagateLabelsThroughMask", kk_mask * dkt)
340
341 # Get average regional thickness values
342 kkRegional_stats = ants.label_stats(kk, dkt_propagated)
```

Listing 1: ANTsPy/ANTsPyNet command calls for a single IXI subject in the evaluation study for the cross-sectional pipeline.

345 In Listing 1, we show the ANTsPy/ANTsPyNet code snippet for cross-sectional processing
346 a single subject which starts with reading the T1-weighted MRI input image, through the
347 generation of the Atropos-style six-tissue segmentation and probability images, applica-
348 tion of `ants.kelly_kapowski` (i.e., DiReCT), DKT cortical parcellation, subsequent label

349 propagation through the cortex, and, finally, regional cortical thickness tabulation. The
350 cross-sectional and longitudinal pipelines are encapsulated in the ANTsPyNet functions
351 `antspynet.cortical_thickness` and `antspynet.longitudinal_cortical_thickness`, re-
352 spectively. Note that there are precise, line-by-line R-based analogs available through
353 ANTsR/ANTsRNet.

354 Both the `ants.deep_atropos` and `antspynet.desikan_killiany_tourville_labeling`
355 functions perform brain extraction using the `antspynet.brain_extraction` function. Intern-
356 ally, `antspynet.brain_extraction` contains the requisite code to build the network and
357 assign the appropriate hyperparameters. The model weights are automatically downloaded
358 from the online hosting site <https://figshare.com> (see the function `get_pretrained_network`
359 in ANTsPyNet or `getPretrainedNetwork` in ANTsRNet for links to all models and weights)
360 and loaded to the constructed network. `antspynet.brain_extraction` performs a quick
361 translation transformation to a specific template (also downloaded automatically) using the
362 centers of intensity mass, a common alignment initialization strategy. This is to ensure
363 proper gross orientation. Following brain extraction, preprocessing for the other two deep
364 learning components includes `ants.denoise_image` and `ants.n4_bias_correction` and an
365 affine-based reorientation to a version of the MNI template.³⁴

366 We recognize the presence of some redundancy due to the repeated application of certain
367 preprocessing steps. Thus, each function has a `do_preprocessing` option to eliminate this
368 redundancy for knowledgeable users but, for simplicity in presentation purposes, we do not
369 provide this modified pipeline here. Although it should be noted that the time difference is
370 minimal considering the longer time required by `ants.kelly_kapowski`. `ants.deep_atropos`
371 returns the segmentation image as well as the posterior probability maps for each tissue
372 type listed previously. `antspynet.desikan_killiany_tourville_labeling` returns only
373 the segmentation label image which includes not only the 62 cortical labels but the remaining
374 labels as well. The label numbers and corresponding structure names are given in the program
375 description/help. Because the DKT parcellation will, in general, not exactly coincide with
376 the non-zero voxels of the resulting cortical thickness maps, we perform a label propagation
377 step to ensure the entire cortex, and only the non-zero thickness values in the cortex, are

378 included in the tabulated regional values.

379 As mentioned previously, the longitudinal version, `antspynet.longitudinal_cortical_thickness`,
380 adds an SST generation step which can either be provided as a program input or it can
381 be constructed from spatial normalization of all time points to a specified template.
382 `ants.deep_atropos` is applied to the SST yielding spatial tissues priors which are then used
383 as input to `ants.atropos` for each time point. `ants.kelly_kapowski` is applied to the
384 result to generate the desired cortical thickness maps.

385 Computational time on a CPU-only platform is approximately 1 hour primarily due to
386 `ants.kelly_kapowski` processing. Other preprocessing steps, i.e., bias correction and de-
387 noising, are on the order of a couple minutes. This total time should be compared with 4 – 5
388 hours using the traditional pipeline employing the `quick` registration option or 10 – 15 hours
389 with the more comprehensive registration parameters employed). As mentioned previously,
390 elimination of the registration-based propagation of prior probability images to individual
391 subjects is the principal source of reduced computational time. For ROI-based analyses, this
392 is in addition to the elimination of the optional generation of a population-specific template.
393 Additionally, the use of `antspynet.desikan_killiany_tourville_labeling`, for cortical
394 labeling (which completes in less than five minutes) eliminates the need for joint label fusion
395 which requires multiple pairwise registrations for each subject in addition to the fusion
396 algorithm itself.

397 Training details

398 Training differed slightly between models and so we provide details for each of these com-
399 ponents below. For all training, we used ANTsRNet scripts and custom batch generators.
400 Although the network construction and other functionality is available in both ANTsPyNet
401 and ANTsRNet (as is model weights compatibility), we have not written such custom batch
402 generators for the former (although this is on our to-do list). In terms of hardware, all
403 training was done on a DGX (GPUs: 4X Tesla V100, system memory: 256 GB LRDIMM
404 DDR4).

405 **T1-weighted brain extraction.** A whole-image 3-D U-net model⁴⁴ was used in conjunction

406 with multiple training sessions employing a Dice loss function followed by categorical cross
407 entropy. Training data was derived from the same multi-site data described previously
408 processed through our registration-based approach.⁵⁸ A center-of-mass-based transformation
409 to a standard template was used to standardize such parameters as orientation and voxel size.
410 However, to account for possible different header orientations of input data, a template-based
411 data augmentation scheme was used³² whereby forward and inverse transforms are used
412 to randomly warp batch images between members of the training population (followed by
413 reorientation to the standard template). A digital random coin flipping for possible histogram
414 matching²⁶ between source and target images further increased data augmentation. The
415 output of the network is a probabilistic mask of the brain. **The architecture consists of**
416 **four encoding/decoding layers with eight filters at the base layer which doubled every layer.**
417 Although not detailed here, training for brain extraction in other modalities was performed
418 similarly.

419 **Deep Atropos.** Dealing with 3-D data presents unique barriers for training that are often
420 unique to medical imaging. Various strategies are employed such as minimizing the number
421 of layers and/or the number of filters at the base layer of the U-net architecture (as we
422 do for brain extraction). However, we found this to be too limiting for capturing certain
423 brain structures such as the cortex. 2-D and 2.5-D approaches are often used with varying
424 levels of success but we also found better performance using full 3-D information. This led
425 us to try randomly selected 3-D patches of various sizes. However, for both the six-tissue
426 segmentations and DKT parcellations, we found that an octant-based patch strategy yielded
427 the desired results. Specifically, after a brain extracted affine normalization to the MNI
428 template, the normalized image is cropped to a size of [160, 190, 160]. Overlapping octant
429 patches of size [112, 112, 112] were extracted from each image and trained using a batch size
430 of 12 such octant patches with weighted categorical cross entropy as the loss function. **The**
431 **architecture consists of four encoding/decoding layers with 16 filters at the base layer which**
432 **doubled every layer.**

433 As we point out in our earlier work,⁶⁶ obtaining proper brain segmentation is perhaps the
434 most critical step to estimating thickness values that have the greatest utility as a potential

435 biomarker. In fact, the first and last authors (NT and BA, respectively) spent much time
436 during the original ANTs pipeline development⁶⁶ trying to get the segmentation correct which
437 required manually looking at many images and manually adjusting where necessary. This
438 fine-tuning is often omitted or not considered when other groups^{24,25,39} use components of our
439 cortical thickness pipeline which can be potentially problematic⁷⁰. Fine-tuning for this partic-
440 ular workflow was also performed between the first and last authors using manual variation of
441 the weights in the weighted categorical cross entropy. Specifically, the weights of each tissue
442 type were altered in order to produce segmentations which most resemble the traditional
443 Atropos segmentations. Ultimately, we settled on a weight vector of (0.05, 1.5, 1, 3, 4, 3, 3) for
444 the CSF, GM, WM, Deep GM, brain stem, and cerebellum, respectively. Other hyperparam-
445 eters can be directly inferred from explicit specification in the actual code. As mentioned
446 previously, training data was derived from application of the ANTs Atropos segmentation⁶⁸
447 during the course of our previous work.⁶⁶ Data augmentation included small affine and
448 deformable perturbations using `antspynet.randomly_transform_image_data` and random
449 contralateral flips.

450 **Desikan-Killiany-Tourville parcellation.** Preprocessing for the DKT parcellation train-
451 ing was similar to the Deep Atropos training. However, the number of labels and the
452 complexity of the parcellation required deviation from other training steps. First, labeling
453 was split into an inner set and an outer set. Subsequent training was performed separately
454 for both of these sets. For the cortical labels, a set of corresponding input prior probability
455 maps were constructed from the training data (and are also available and automatically
456 downloaded, when needed, from <https://figshare.com>). Training occurred over multiple
457 sessions where, initially, categorical cross entropy was used and then subsequently refined
458 using a Dice loss function. Whole-brain training was performed on a brain-cropped template
459 size of [96, 112, 96]. Inner label training was performed similarly to our brain extraction
460 training where the number of layers at the base layer was reduced to eight. Training also
461 occurred over multiple sessions where, initially, categorical cross entropy was used and then
462 subsequently refined using a Dice loss function. Other hyperparameters can be directly
463 inferred from explicit specification in the actual code. Training data was derived from
464 application of joint label fusion⁶³ during the course of our previous work.⁶⁶ When call-

⁴⁶⁵ ing `antspynet.desikan_killiany_tourville_labeling`, inner labels are estimated first
⁴⁶⁶ followed by the outer cortical labels.

⁴⁶⁷ **Other softwares**

⁴⁶⁸ Several R¹ packages were used in preparation of this manuscript including R Markdown,^{10–12}
⁴⁶⁹ lme4,⁷ RStan,⁶ ggplot2,⁹ and ggradar2.⁸ Other packages used include Apple Pages,³ ITK-
⁴⁷⁰ SNAP,² LibreOffice,⁴ and diagrams.net.⁵

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⁴⁷⁶ Data used in preparation of this article were obtained from the Alzheimer's Disease Neu-
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⁴⁷⁸ within the ADNI contributed to the design and implementation of ADNI and/or provided
⁴⁷⁹ data but did not participate in analysis or writing of this report. A complete listing of
⁴⁸⁰ ADNI investigators can be found at: <http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how> to
⁴⁸¹ apply/AD NI Acknowledgement List.pdf

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572 **Author contributions**

- 573 • Conception and design N.T., A.H., M.Y., J.S., B.A.
- 574 • Analysis and interpretation N.T., A.H., D.G., M.Y., J.S. B.A.
- 575 • Creation of new software N.T., P.C., H.J., J.M., G.D., J.D., S.D., N.C., J.G., B.A.
- 576 • Drafting of manuscript N.T., A.H., P.C., H.J., J.M., G.D., J.G., B.A.

577 **Competing interests**

578 The authors declare no competing interests.