

SPECIAL ISSUE REVIEW ARTICLE

The role of diffusion MRI in neuroscience

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Funding information

Agence Nationale de la Recherche, Grant/Award Number: ANR-10-IAIHU-06 and ANR-13-JSV4-0001-01

Diffusion-weighted imaging has pushed the boundaries of neuroscience by allowing us to examine the white matter microstructure of the living human brain. By doing so, it has provided answers to fundamental neuroscientific questions, launching a new field of research that had been largely inaccessible. We briefly summarize key questions that have historically been raised in neuroscience concerning the brain's white matter. We then expand on the benefits of diffusion-weighted imaging and its contribution to the fields of brain anatomy, functional models and plasticity. In doing so, this review highlights the invaluable contribution of diffusion-weighted imaging in neuroscience, presents its limitations and proposes new challenges for future generations who may wish to exploit this powerful technology to gain novel insights.

KEYWORDS

anatomy, brain, connections, diffusion, models, plasticity, tractography, white matter

1 | INTRODUCTION

*'We admire the contrivance of the fibre of every muscle, and ought still more to admire their disposition in the Brain, where an infinite number of them contained in a very small space, each execute their particular offices without confusion or disorder.'*¹

As noted by Steno¹, post-mortem dissections of the brain reveal an astonishing level of complexity, particularly within the white matter fibre pathways, composed of trillions of axons. As Isaac Newton intuitively suggested a few years later, these axons propagate electricity *'along the solid filament of the nerves, from the outward organs of sense to the brain, and from the brain into the muscles'*.² Anatomical exploration of the white matter connections of the human brain then becomes a new challenge, mixing medical knowledge with advanced practical skills of dissection and illustration (Figure 1).

These anatomical descriptions were a stepping-stone for the elaboration of new theories of brain function. This can be seen, for example, towards the end of the 19th century, when Meynert extended Newton's vision even further, by introducing the possibility of reasoning occurring through the association of specialized areas of the brain via their white matter connections. The concept of associationism thus was born.⁵

Empirical validation of associationism came soon after with the study of patients with brain lesions and well-defined symptoms. Such studies required patience, as individual brain anatomy could only be revealed after death. Thus, research projects might well have lasted a lifetime for some or have remained unachieved for others. Nevertheless, studies of single cases or case series revealed the first white matter biomarkers for

Abbreviations used: ADD, axon diameter distribution; CC, corpus callosum; CHARMED, composite hindered and restricted model of diffusion; DTI, diffusion tensor imaging; DWI, diffusion-weighted MRI; FA, fractional anisotropy; LTD, long-term depression; LTP, long-term potentiation; MBP, myelin basic protein; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; SMA, supplementary motor area

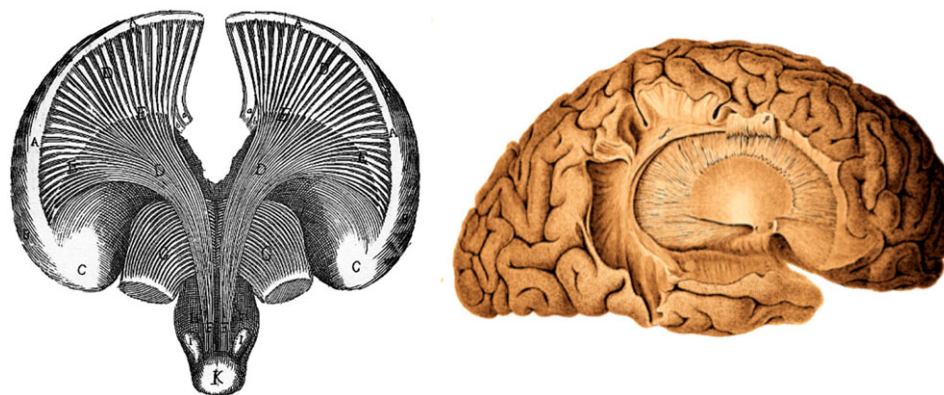


FIGURE 1 First drawings of white matter connection in the human brain. Left, brain dissection from de Vieussens;³ right, brain dissection from Johann Christian Reil⁴

neurological syndromes, such as conduction aphasia,⁶ transcortical motor aphasia, subcortical motor aphasia, transcortical sensory aphasia, subcortical sensory aphasia,⁷ alexia without agraphia,⁸ and bilateral and unilateral apraxia.⁹ These historical contributions demonstrated that the proper functioning of the brain can be disrupted even by distant lesions through disconnection and diaschisis mechanisms.^{10,11}

Fundamental advances in our understanding of brain function came from this work. Nevertheless, this static vision of the brain did not account for classical conditioning effects¹² or memory,¹³ or diaschisis^{14–16} phenomena that required notions of plasticity. Donald Hebb introduced this concept as follows: 'Let us assume that the persistence or repetition of a reverberatory activity (or "trace") tends to induce lasting cellular changes that add to its stability.... When an axon of cell A is near enough to excite a cell B and repeatedly or persistently takes part in firing it, some growth process or metabolic change takes place in one or both cells such that A's efficiency, as one of the cells firing B, is increased.' With these words, Hebbian theory acknowledged the possibility for changes to occur in the brain, and provided a framework for the conceptualization of learning through the mechanisms of plasticity.¹⁷ However, measures of plasticity were quite challenging, as they required the anatomical investigation of living samples with very invasive methods.

Decades later, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) brought a new window on human brain anatomy. In 1985, a breakthrough came with the emergence of diffusion-weighted MRI (DWI¹⁸). DWI measures the diffusion of water molecules along different directions. Given that axons are impermeable, they constrain water diffusion to their main direction. Hence, DWI indirectly assesses white matter microstructure. Further, by piecing together local estimates of water diffusion orientation, the main bundles of axons can be reconstructed. This technique clearly boosted research because of its non-invasiveness. Anatomical studies performed in living human brains were able to refine the description of large fibre bundles,^{19,20} allowing for replication in large numbers of participants^{21,22} and enabling the discovery of inter-individual variability.^{23,24} Functional models could now benefit from whole brain connectomes for the first time,²⁵ identifying new disconnection syndromes²⁶ and allowing for new divisions of the cortex based on axonal inputs and outputs or connectivity-based parcellation.^{27,28} Finally, the structural connectome of an individual could be assessed at different time points, allowing for the investigation of white matter plasticity for the first time.²⁹

Hence, in this review of the role of DWI in neuroscience, we first describe the anatomical advances provided by this method and then survey its importance in the establishment of new brain models. Finally, we review studies that have investigated white matter plasticity. Hopefully, the ideas expressed in this review will provide a comprehensive understanding of the scientific question investigated with DWI and encourage new generations to pursue and exploit this powerful technology to gain novel insights into human brain wiring.

2 | ANATOMY

Diffusion MRI provides different types of information about human brain anatomy. Local (voxel-wise) measures of diffusion properties can provide insight into local white matter microstructure, whereas the exploitation of these measures to perform *in vivo* tractography can provide information on the organization of white matter at a systems level.

2.1 | Local measures of white matter microstructure

Voxel-wise measures of diffusion properties, such as fractional anisotropy (FA) or mean diffusivity, are modulated by local tissue microstructure.³⁰ For example, studies in model systems show that FA increases with increasing packing density or decreasing axon diameter,³¹ and decreases with reductions in myelin.³² However, although empirical or simulation studies can clearly demonstrate that variation in these tissue properties modulates diffusion parameters, we are still faced with an inverse problem when trying to interpret an observed difference in diffusion parameters (e.g. reduced FA), as there is no one-to-one relationship between a given diffusion parameter and the underlying tissue structure.^{33–37} Nevertheless, diffusion parameters provide useful non-invasive measures of local tissue microstructure, with sensitivity to features including

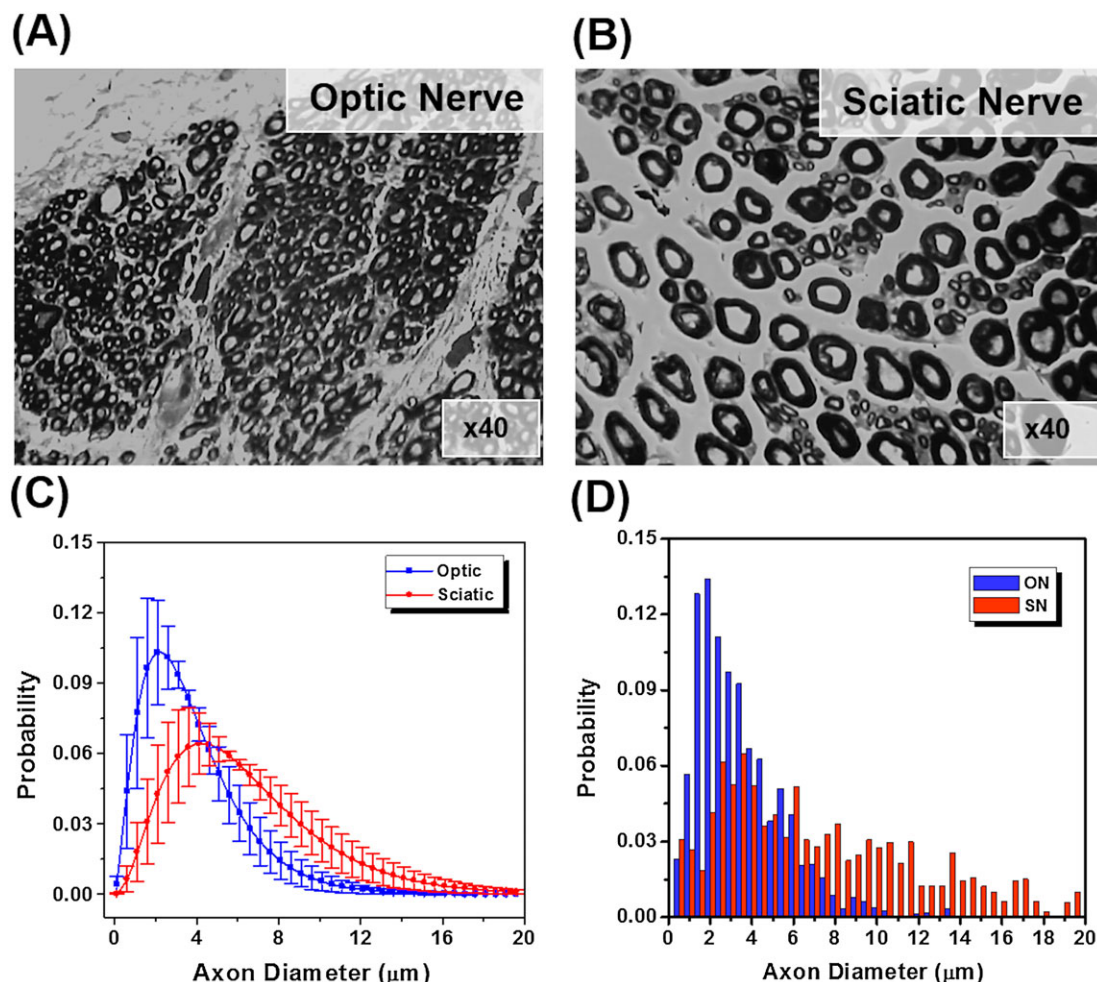


FIGURE 2 AxCaliber of porcine optic and sciatic nerves. (A, B) electron microscope sections of optic nerve (A) and sciatic nerve (B). (C) AxCaliber axon diameter distribution (optic, blue; sciatic, red). (D) Axon diameter distribution derived from electron microscopy

membrane integrity, myelin thickness, axon diameter and packing density. These physical characteristics of the white matter fibre bundle will have consequences for the physiological functioning of that bundle, affecting properties such as the conduction time, refractory time, probability of transmission or even synchronization of signals across a distributed cortico-cortical network. Variations in these physiological properties may, in turn, be expected to give rise to variation in behavioural outputs.^{33,38,39}

For instance, left and right hemispheres show variation in function as well as in anatomy. Diffusion parameter comparison between the two hemispheres indicates increased FA in the left hemisphere in the external capsule,⁴⁰ cingulum bundle⁴¹ and perisylvian white matter,⁴² thought to support left hemispheric dominance for language functions.^{43,44} Right asymmetries have also been identified in the dorsal fronto-parietal white matter⁴² that may be related to the right hemispheric dominance for the spatial processing of information. However, the high variability between subjects and the lack of behavioural measures in these preliminary studies did not allow a solid relationship to be drawn between voxel-wise measures of interhemispheric differences and functional dominance. In particular, the relationship between language lateralization and structural connectivity measures in the language system remains intricate.^{43,45}

Further studies have shown that individual differences in measures of local white matter microstructure correlate with variations in physiological properties of the fibre pathways.^{46–52} For example, paired-pulse transcranial magnetic stimulation can be used to probe the functional connectivity of a cortico-cortical connection. A conditioning pulse applied to the dorsal premotor cortex of one hemisphere will modulate the excitability of the primary motor cortex in the other hemisphere; the degree of modulation can be used to estimate the functional connectivity between the two cortical areas. Individual differences in this measure have been found to correlate with variation in white matter FA, such that individuals with stronger functional connectivity have higher FA in callosal or subcortical white matter pathways between premotor and motor cortex.⁵³ This supports the idea that variation in white matter microstructure is associated with variation in the physiological properties of these fibre bundles.

Advanced DWI analyses provide estimates of the axon diameter distribution (ADD) or fibre composition, together with other physical properties, such as the intra-axonal resistance, membrane resistance and capacitance, etc., helping to determine many important functional properties of nerves, such as their conduction velocity or rate of information transfer.^{54–58} Neural pathways that are characterized by fast reaction times (e.g. within the motor system) will also exhibit a higher percentage of large-diameter axons. However, pathways that show slow conduction

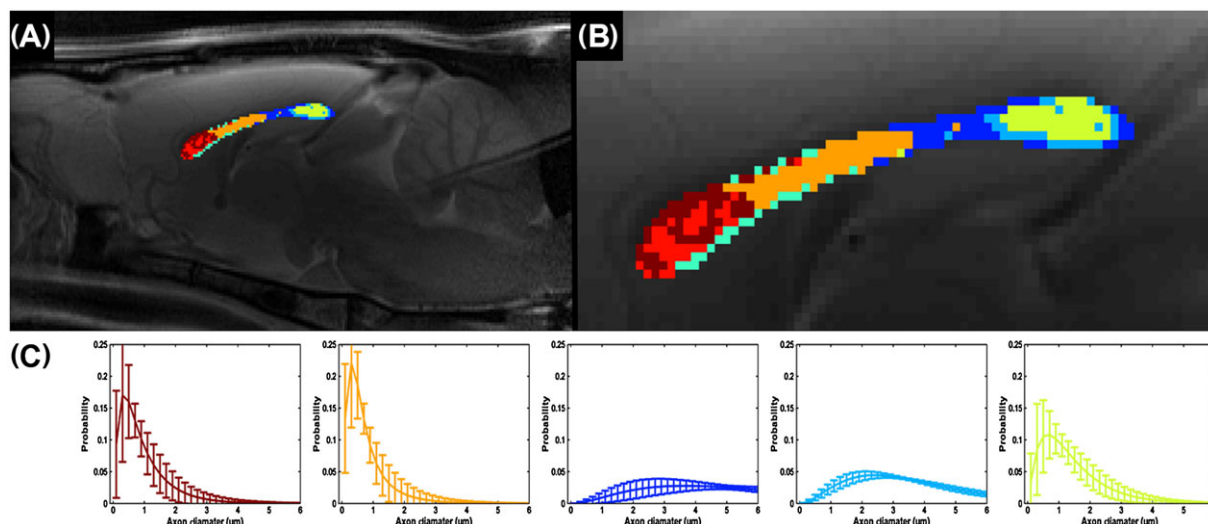


FIGURE 3 Cluster analysis of AxCaliber's axon diameter distribution (ADD) along the corpus callosum: (A) mid-sagittal T_2 -weighted magnetic resonance imaging with the AxCaliber clusters superimposed; (B) enlarged (A); (C) AxCaliber averaged ADDs for the different clusters given in (A) and (B)

velocity will also exhibit a larger population of smaller axons or even non-myelinated axons. Therefore, it is only logical to assume that the properties of ADD play a critical role in healthy central nervous system functioning and will be dramatically affected in abnormal conditions and disease.

Despite the fundamental new insights it provides, DWI has several important limitations. The key limitation is implicit in the diffusion tensor model (diffusion tensor imaging, DTI⁵⁹). This assumption oversimplifies the true motion of water within brain tissue. The practical consequence of this oversimplification of the diffusion tensor model is that the common DTI indices, mean diffusivity and FA, are non-specific to any particular tissue compartment. Features of microstructure, such as cell size, density, permeability and orientation distribution, all affect DTI indices, and changes in the indices are impossible to associate with more specific changes in microstructural features. Recent trends have aimed to use more sophisticated models of diffusion in order to measure microstructural features directly.^{60,61} One such approach for modelling the diffusion signal (instead of DTI) is to devise a mathematical formalism that is guided by tissue geometry. Yet, anyone who has looked down a microscope at a brain section would have been impressed by the complexity of the white matter geometry.^{36,62} Cells of different shapes and sizes with processes spreading at different scales and orientations depict a mess of geometries at the micrometre scale. Even at a lower level of magnification, where cell layers and fibre bundles are visible, complexity arises where fibres cross, disperse and fan within hundreds of micrometres.

Pioneering work by Stanisz et al.⁶³ attempted to reduce the complexity of neural tissue modelling by introducing a two-compartment geometrical framework that includes diffusion within spheres and cylinders. Further studies have suggested that diffusion within the confined boundaries of cells and axons can be regarded as restricted diffusion. Under this approach, it is hypothesized that the geometry of the tissue affects the diffusivity of water molecules. For example, it is reasonable to assume that water diffusion within the axon will be restricted by the myelin membrane, whereas elsewhere it will only be hindered or free. This is the basis for the composite hindered and restricted model of diffusion (CHARMED).^{60,64} In CHARMED, restricted diffusion in the intra-axonal space is modelled as diffusion within impermeable cylinders.⁶⁴⁻⁶⁶ As a consequence, the CHARMED model allows enhanced characterization of the axonal water compartment. One of the advantages of CHARMED is that it is possible to reconstruct the three-dimensional displacement distribution function for each of the components (hindered and restricted). Thus, it is possible to extract physically meaningful parameters for each of the diffusing components; these parameters include the diffusivity of the extra-axonal matrix (diffusivity of the hindered part), the axonal density (the volume fraction of the restricted part) and the fibre direction (the orientation density function of the restricted part). Although the CHARMED model provides a conceptual framework to separate different modes of diffusion and relate them to tissue compartments, it allows the modelling of two to three different fibre orientations with accuracy limited by the number of measured directions.⁶⁰ Subsequent studies attempted to expand the CHARMED model to include fibre dispersion and fanning within a voxel and increase the accuracy and orientation estimation of the model.⁶⁷⁻⁷¹ Noteworthy is the NODDI framework which expands CHARMED to also model the dispersion of fibre orientation, but with optimized acquisition and analysis pipelines.⁶⁹

Neural tissue is complex, and it should be realized that there is no single model that can capture all the details and complexity of different neural compartments.^{62,72} The different abovementioned models (and others) try to separate different features of interest of the tissue. Obviously, the inclusion of too many free parameters in the model will lead to computational problems, such as overfitting and other optimization and data fitting issues. Thus, the optimal model for diffusion imaging depends on the research question. For example, an important feature of white matter that is not modelled in CHARMED or NODDI is the axon diameter.⁷³⁻⁷⁵ Being an important feature of brain connectivity with implications for conduction velocity and information transfer efficiency within the brain,^{76,77} the *in vivo* measurement of the axonal diameter became another modelling challenge. In an extension of the CHARMED framework, called AxCaliber, the estimation of ADD also became feasible.^{78,79} The idea behind AxCaliber is that each axon size will experience restricted diffusion at a different diffusion time. For example, an axon with a diameter of 1 μm will experience restricted

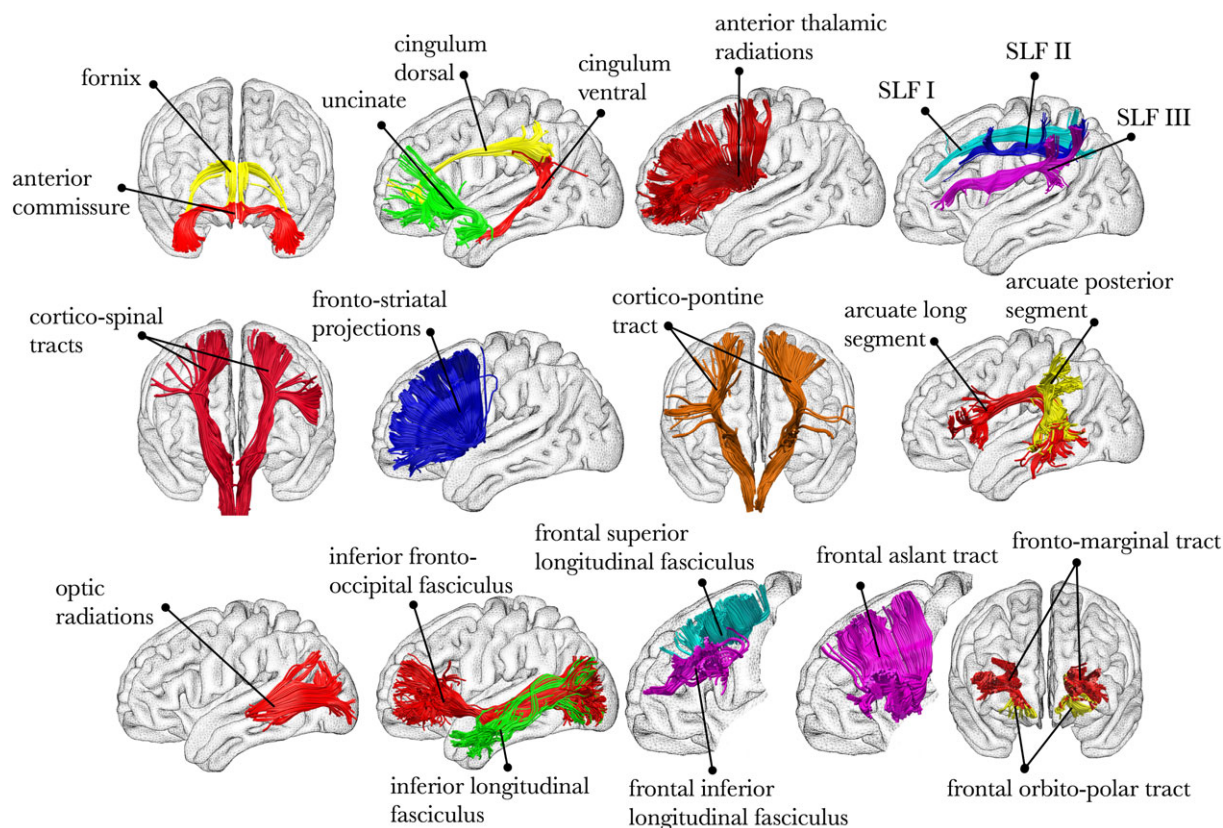


FIGURE 4 Virtual dissection of the major fibre pathways in the human brain,⁹⁰ Superior Longitudinal Fasciculus (SLF)

diffusion at very short diffusion times, whereas a larger axon will experience restricted diffusion only when the diffusion time is increased. By acquiring a multi-diffusion time CHARMED dataset, it is possible to accurately estimate the ADD function with the AxCaliber framework. In AxCaliber, unlike CHARMED, water diffusion is measured exactly perpendicular to the long axis of the fibres (this is a prerequisite of the model). It was found that, by using a gamma function (with only two free parameters), it is possible to adequately estimate the ADD function by AxCaliber.⁷⁹

The AxCaliber framework was verified on excised samples of optic and sciatic nerves. These two nerve samples have very different ADD functions (Figure 2). The AxCaliber diameter distribution functions were in good agreement with those obtained from histology (Figure 2).⁷⁹ In addition, AxCaliber was implemented to study the morphology of the corpus callosum (*in vivo*). AxCaliber analysis was performed on a voxel-by-voxel basis providing the ADD function for each voxel. These distributions were used as input to a clustering algorithm in order to visualize regions with significantly different ADD. The clustering based on ADD was able to segment the corpus callosum into several regions that fitted known morphological zones of these samples⁸⁰ (Figure 3). Recently, ADD was demonstrated in human brain and was also shown to correlate with conduction velocity measures of interhemispheric transmission time.⁸¹ Hence, correlations between *in vivo* measures of axonal diameters and reaction time measures during cognitive paradigms will be of particular interest in the near future.

It should be noted that the original AxCaliber framework suffers from several inherent limitations. The first is the need to measure the diffusion properties exactly perpendicular to the fibre orientation. This limits the application of the method to the corpus callosum. In a further development of the CHARMED and NODDI frameworks, it was suggested that the mean axon diameter could be directly measured for any oriented fibre system.⁸² The ActiveAx acquisition and analysis pipeline, although not measuring the entire axonal distribution probability function, provides an approach to estimate the mean axon diameter for the entire brain. Another limitation to the measurement of axonal diameter properties with diffusion imaging is the need to have a high diffusion gradient amplitude in order to obtain comparable accuracy over a wide spread of axon diameters. It was shown theoretically that small axons (<1 μm) are inaccurately estimated with current gradient technology and bias the overall measured axon diameter.^{83,84} This measurement artefact is significantly minimized with new gradient technology, providing high amplitudes of diffusion gradients (300 mT/m).⁸⁵ Moreover, other studies have suggested that the modelling algorithm can be further developed to cope with the abovementioned limitations by introducing additional features, such as restricted diffusion within the extracellular space.⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸ Yet, despite this limitation, the measurement of axonal properties provides an additional microstructural feature that can better characterize brain connections and connectivity.

2.2 | Tractography to estimate long-range connectivity

As mentioned above, local estimates of dominant diffusion directions can be followed to reconstruct estimates of fibre pathways. There are many different methodological approaches to perform diffusion tractography, as reviewed elsewhere in this special issue.^{37,89} From the neuroanatomical

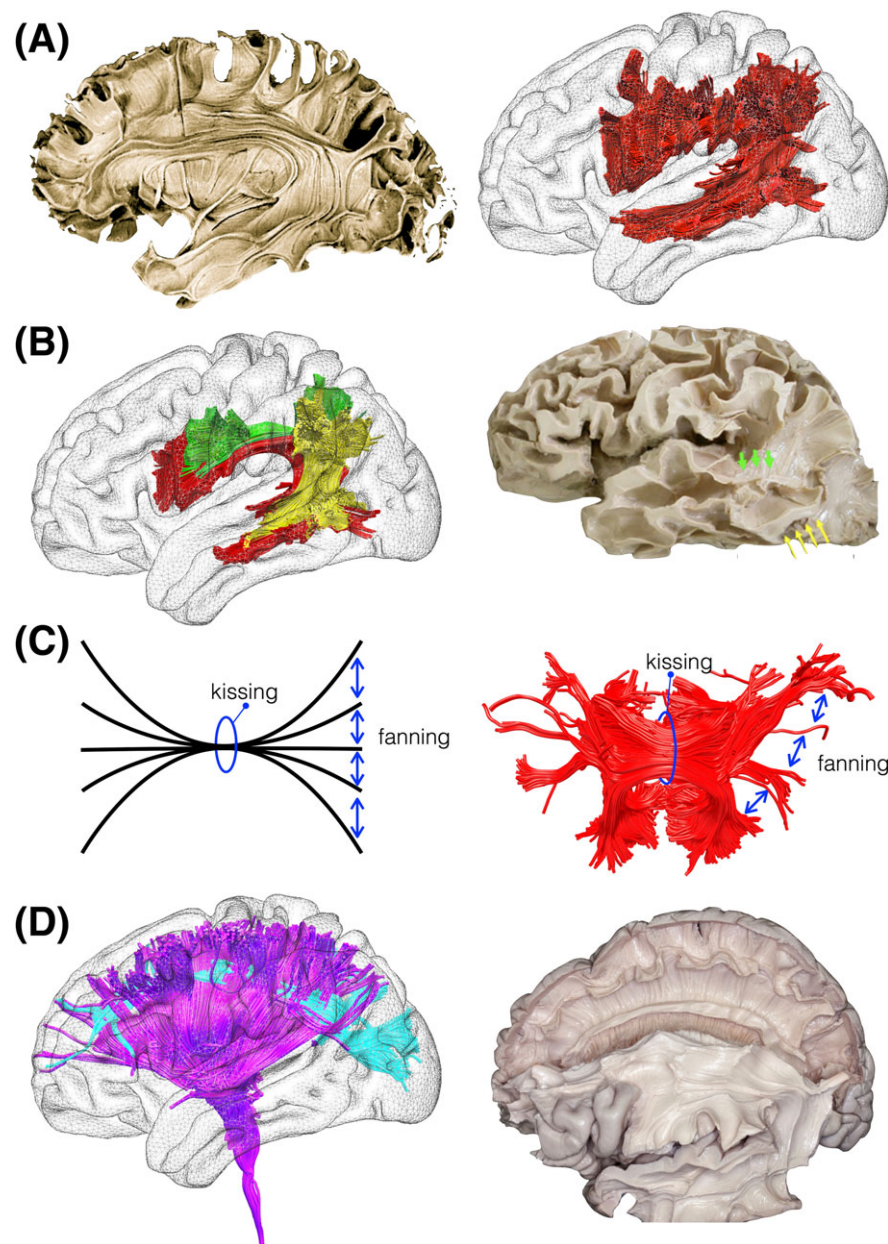


FIGURE 5 White matter anatomy from early tractography to advanced models. (A) standard anatomical description of the arcuate fasciculus (left),¹⁰⁴ replicated with diffusion-weighted imaging tractography (right).¹⁹ (B) new anatomical model of the arcuate fasciculus (left),²⁰ validated with Klingler post-mortem dissection (right).⁹⁵ (C) model of white matter configurations that challenged classical tractography (left); example of the tractography of the corpus callosum splenium showing the same limitation (right). (D) first branch of the superior longitudinal fasciculus crossing with the corona radiata discovered in humans with advanced spherical deconvolution tractography (left),⁷⁷ later validated with Klingler post-mortem dissection (right)¹⁰⁵

perspective, tractography allows us to estimate the organization of major fibre pathways in the human brain (Figure 4) and to explore variation in the strength and organization of these pathways between individuals or over time.

Early applications of diffusion tractography were able to provide the first 'in vivo dissections' and mapping of major white matter fibre bundles in the human brain with an increasing precision,^{19,21,91-100} and led to the publication of several atlases.¹⁰¹⁻¹⁰³

The use of tractography for anatomical studies has mostly depicted associative tracts (i.e. cortico-cortical connection) as they were defined in the early 19th century (Figure 5A). The handling of tractography was indeed much easier than standard post-mortem white matter dissections and led to the discovery of new associative tracts which were consequently replicated using standard post-mortem Klingler dissections.^{104,106} In this sense, tractography has boosted our anatomical knowledge of white matter pathways by providing an easier access to white matter connections.^{107,108} For instance, much evidence from tractography, cross-validated with post-mortem dissections, has now converged towards a model of the arcuate fasciculus split into three branches (temporo-parietal, fronto-parietal and posterior parieto-temporal, Figure 5B). However, caution is required as many limitations in tractography may mislead neuroanatomists by piecing together different tract segments into large single bundles.^{37,89}

This is particularly the case for projection (i.e. subcortico-cortical) and commissural pathways (i.e. interhemispheric), which have been more challenging to dissect because of severe limitations in the tractography of complex white matter configurations (i.e. crossing, fanning and kissing configurations) (Figure 5C). Although crossing has been the focus of interest of much work for the past 5 years, with very promising results particularly evident with the use of spherical deconvolution tractography¹⁰⁹⁻¹¹⁴ (Figure 5D), fanning and kissing configurations still remain a clear challenge in this field of research. The fanning limitation is characterized by an underestimation of the fibre count reaching an area and the kissing

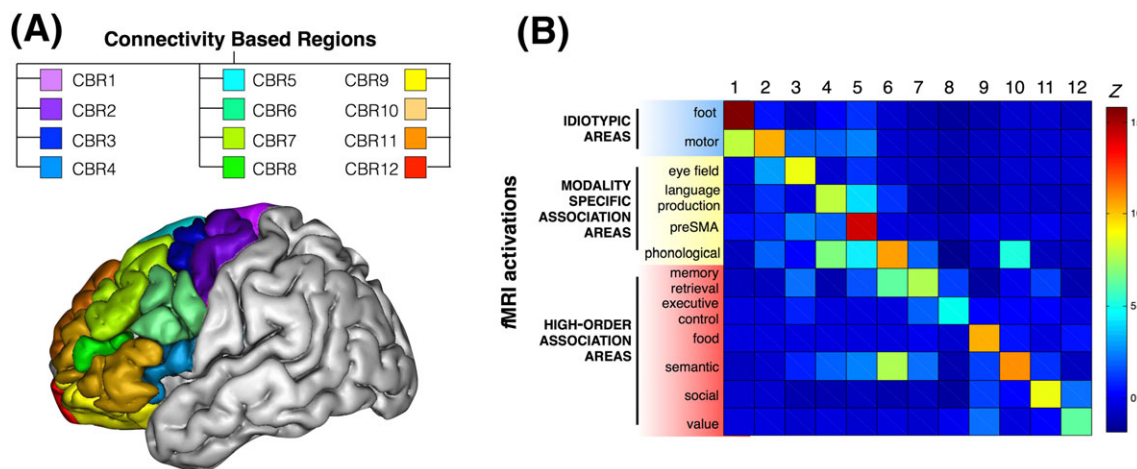


FIGURE 6 Connectivity-based parcellation of the frontal lobes. (A) three-dimensional lateral view of the brain and the 12 regions defined by the structural connections with the rest of the brain. (B) functional specificity of the 12 connectivity-based regions. CBR, connectivity-based region; fMRI, functional magnetic resonance imaging

limitation by the misidentification of the correct group of fibres to track. Together, these two problems have hampered progress in the depiction of the projection and commissural pathways.¹¹⁵⁻¹¹⁷

2.3 | Tractography to divide grey matter into subregions

At a cortical level, the supplementary motor area (SMA) and pre-SMA, two areas working hierarchically in the control of action,¹¹⁸ have a different pattern of connection with the rest of the brain. Exploiting this difference, connectivity information gained from diffusion tractography can be used to define the boundary between these two regions based purely on connectivity, driven by the fact that SMA shows a closer relationship with the primary motor cortex, whereas pre-SMA is more connected to the prefrontal cortex.²⁷ Indeed, connectivity-based parcellation has been used to define subdivisions across a range of different human cortical areas,¹¹⁹⁻¹²⁶ as well as to demonstrate homologies between human and monkey cortex.¹²⁷⁻¹³³ Recently, diffusion tractography has been used, together with other multimodal structural and functional MRI data, to generate a novel whole brain cortical parcellation using data from the Human Connectome Project (Figure 6A).¹²⁶

Alongside enthusiasm for the newfound ability to visualize white matter bundles in living human brains have been notes of caution to keep in mind that tractography is not the same as invasive tract tracing. 'Gold standard' invasive tract tracing typically involves the injection of a tracer into an area of interest, allowing it to be taken up by cells, and then observing it in interconnected regions after it has been transported there via anterograde and/or retrograde transport mechanisms. As such, invasive tract tracing involves the tracing of axonal pathways. By contrast, in diffusion tractography, we are typically following estimates of the path of least resistance to diffusion. In many cases, this corresponds roughly to the path of the dominant fibre orientation, but in other cases it does not. There is therefore awareness that, as with any method in biology, diffusion tractography is susceptible to false negatives (the inability to track pathways that we know exist) and false positives (the tracking of spurious pathways). Much valuable work has been carried out to try to validate diffusion tractography, giving us a clearer idea of the limitations and strengths of the method.¹³⁴⁻¹⁴¹ This is challenging work, requiring the development of novel phantoms with realistic properties,^{116,142} or meticulous reconstruction of fibre pathways from brain sections taken from tract tracing experiments.^{143,144} Such work is encouraging, but there is more to be done to allow neuroscientists to be able to interpret diffusion tractography results with confidence.¹⁴⁵

3 | FUNCTIONAL MODELS

Functional models of the brain originally emerged from the study of brain-damaged patients.¹⁴⁶ The localization of the lesion in the brain was indeed interpreted as the core origin of the functional impairment.¹⁴⁷ However, the localization of the lesion appeared to be insufficient to explain the existence of patients with different lesions and similar symptoms. The idea emerged that the communication between these regions was impaired through a mechanism of white matter disconnection. A traditional model of disconnection syndromes includes conduction aphasia,⁶ transcortical motor aphasia, subcortical motor aphasia, transcortical sensory aphasia, subcortical sensory aphasia,⁷ alexia without agraphia,⁸ and bilateral and unilateral apraxia.⁹ With the advent of brain imaging, the neuroimaging community focused on voxels independently,¹⁴⁸⁻¹⁵⁰ without any attempts to capture correlation across them,^{151,152} effectively masking disconnection syndromes.^{153,154} The access to the visualization and mapping of white matter connections instead allowed for the investigation of white matter connections in patients and led to the discovery of new disconnection syndromes. For instance, visuo-spatial neglect, a severe neurological condition characterized by the loss of half of the visual field's awareness, is associated with the disruption of the fibres connecting the frontal to the parietal lobe.^{26,153,155} Tractography also contributed

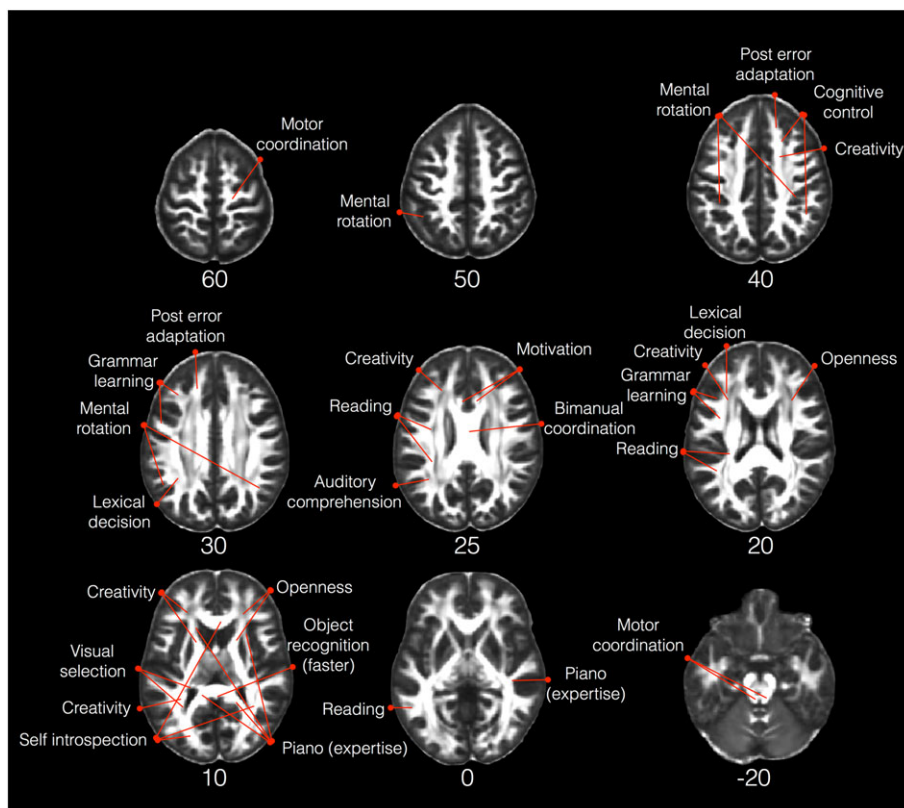


FIGURE 7 Correlations between individual differences in behavioural performance for a given task and variation in white matter microstructure. Axial slices are displayed in neurological convention. Numbers indicate MNI152 axial coordinates.¹⁶⁶ L, left; R, right

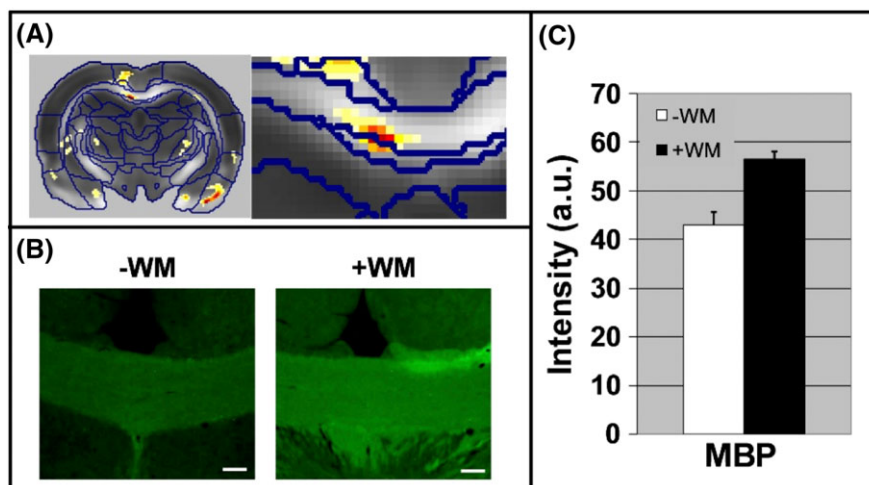
to the establishment or confirmation of a new disconnection hypothesis for Gerstmann syndrome,¹⁵⁶ and neurodevelopmental hypoconnectivity hypotheses for psychopathy,¹⁵⁷ dyslexia¹⁵⁸ and congenital prosopagnosia.¹⁵⁹ Conversely, aberrant/increased connections (i.e. hyperconnection) hypotheses have recently been suggested as potential mechanisms for inattention in attention deficit hyperactive disorders,¹⁶⁰ and auditory¹⁶¹⁻¹⁶³ and visual¹⁶⁴ hallucinations in schizophrenia. All of these results demonstrate the utmost importance of brain connection to the proper functioning of the brain. Indeed, brain areas deprived of their inputs (i.e. afferent connections) or outputs (i.e. efferent connections) will no longer be able to contribute to the elaboration of cognition and behaviour.

With regard to effects on behaviour, studies have shown that individual differences in behavioural performance for a given task correlate with variation in the white matter microstructure of task-relevant pathways, even in young healthy populations.^{38,39,165} For example, as summarized in Figure 7, variation in bimanual co-ordination skills correlates with variation in FA in the body of the corpus callosum, a white matter area that contains transcallosal pathways between primary and supplementary motor areas.¹⁶⁷ Similar effects have been found in a wide range of sensory, motor and cognitive domains including, for example, vision,¹⁶⁸⁻¹⁷⁰ audition,¹⁷¹ motor skills¹⁷²⁻¹⁷⁶ and language,^{177,178} literacy,¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸¹ emotion¹⁸² and motivation,¹⁸³ visuo-spatial,¹⁸⁴ memory¹⁸⁵ and executive function,^{176,186,187} and individual characteristics, such as creativity,¹⁸⁸ musical skills¹⁸⁹ and personality.^{190,191}

Such evidence suggests that the function of a brain area can be defined by its afferent connections from and efferent connections to other areas.¹⁹²⁻¹⁹⁴ As reported in the previous section, brain regions can be characterized by their structural connectivity with the rest of the brain. Therefore, boundaries based on structural connectivity might well provide a functional parcellation of the brain. Preliminary evidence has started to abound in this direction. For example, the delineation of subregions of the human thalamus is important to be able to study the function of these regions *in vivo* and to be able to target specific nuclei for surgical interventions, such as deep brain stimulation for movement disorders. However, divisions between thalamic nuclei are not visible on standard structural MRI. Using diffusion tractography, thalamic subregions can be reliably identified based on cortical connectivity patterns.²⁸ These connectivity-based divisions have been shown to have functional relevance,^{195,196} and could be useful for individualized neurosurgical planning.¹⁹⁷ Recently, tractography has revealed a division of the frontal lobes in 12 areas characterized by their connection with the rest of the brain and a clear-cut functional specificity (Figure 6B).¹²⁶ Hence, a model of structural connectivity assessed with tractography seems to capture the functional organization of the brain.

However, the past two decades have been marked by the discovery of large inter-individual variability in brain structure and function (i.e. different phenotype), creating additional challenges in furthering the understanding of the brain and a lack of models to explain its functioning.¹⁹⁸⁻²⁰¹ Studies have begun to explore and describe these pathways across large numbers of individuals.^{24,117,202} Just as studies have found that individual differences in behaviour correlate with variation in local white matter microstructure, so, too, have tractography studies found that variations in the

FIGURE 8 White matter plasticity following a 5-day water maze (WM). (A) statistical parametric maps of interaction in fractional anisotropy (FA) values between scan time (pre- versus post-water maze) and group (learning versus control). An enlargement of the corpus callosum region is shown on the right. (B) Immunohistochemical staining ($\times 10$ magnification) of the corpus callosum (CC) for myelin basic protein (MBP). Note the increase in MBP immunoreactivity in the CC after the WM task. (C) quantification of the immunoreactivity (staining intensity) in the CC ($p < 0.05$)



'strength' or organization of white matter fibres relate to variations in behaviour. For instance, language areas and their interconnections are predominantly represented in the left hemisphere for most, but not all, healthy participants.^{203,204} However, individuals vary in the degree of lateralization and people with more symmetric patterns of connection have been shown to perform better at episodic memory tasks.²⁰³ These differences are important considerations for the field of clinical neuroscience. Forkel et al.²⁰⁵ demonstrated that the phenotype of the structural network supporting language (i.e. arcuate fasciculus) may interact with recovery after a stroke in the left hemisphere. In addition, Lunven et al.²⁰⁶ reported that the strength of interhemispheric communication is important for the recovery of visuo-spatial neglect after a stroke in the right hemisphere (for extensive reviews on the role of diffusion MRI in the clinical neurosciences, see Cercignani and Wheeler-Kingshott²⁰⁷ and Hess).²⁰⁸ Hence, the study of inter-individual variability is a new line of research directly accessible in large-scale projects, such as the Human Connectome Project (<https://www.humanconnectome.org>), where high-quality diffusion MRI data have been acquired in 1200 subjects and openly shared with the community.²⁰⁹ The use of DWI tractography to characterise the functional specialization of brain areas at the individual level may therefore benefit the domain of inter-individual variability, providing a more tailored brain model when performing group comparisons, eventually making methods such as spatial registration and smoothing obsolete.

4 | MEASURES OF PLASTICITY

Until the mid-1990s, research on white matter was limited to histological investigations of its anatomy for two reasons: (1) there was no *in vivo* non-invasive imaging method that could provide quantitative measures of white matter; (2) it was thought that, in the fully developed and healthy brain, the microstructure of white matter should be roughly stable and fixed. Nevertheless, recent studies have suggested that the white matter can undergo changes following training or cognitive experience. Such studies have coined the term white matter plasticity.

Neuroplasticity, the functional and structural reorganization capacity of the brain, may occur at several levels (from molecular to regional changes) and time scales (seconds^{210,211} to years²¹²). Obviously, the definition of neuroplasticity and its investigation are centred around neurons and less on white matter. Nevertheless, the scope of neuroplasticity is wide, ranging from short-term changes at the synapse through long-term potentiation (LTP) and depression (LTD) mechanisms, to long-lasting new neuronal connections (dendritic trees).²¹³⁻²¹⁸

Pioneering studies have revealed that new white matter projections can be formed following extensive learning procedures.^{219,220} These studies, performed on post-mortem monkey brains using tracer methods, revealed that the brain can rewire itself concomitantly to cortical neuroplasticity.²²¹ Recent studies have utilized diffusion tensor imaging to reveal white matter changes following long-term training (weeks to months).^{181,189,222} These studies have suggested that diffusion imaging can be sensitive to white matter plasticity. Recent evidence has shown that, following only a 5-day water maze task, in addition to significant cortical plasticity, white matter plasticity in the corpus callosum could be detected with DTI.²²³ Histology showed that this plasticity, characterized by an increase in FA, is also manifested by elevated levels of myelin (Figure 8). In addition, a recent molecular imaging study has suggested that, following action potentials, signalling mechanisms control oligodendrocyte myelin formation.²²⁴ This experiment was conducted on cultured neural tissue. Indeed, a recent study has shown that 2 h of spatial navigation tasks are sufficient to cause diffusion changes in the fornix. All these studies on plasticity have limitations²²⁵ and future research is needed in order to strengthen this field.

These experiments, although performed on different species and samples (humans, rodents and tissue cultures) suggest that white matter is a dynamic tissue. Yet, what exactly happens in white matter is not fully understood and the temporal evolution of this phenomenon is uncharted. Specifically, a significant impact on neuroscience will be the demonstration of white matter plasticity in the human brain following short episodes (minutes/hours) of training. We anticipate that short-term white matter plasticity will stimulate different mechanisms from long-term plasticity; however, DTI may not be sufficiently sensitive and specific to demonstrate this difference. More specific methods, such as CHARMED and

AxCaliber, could provide the enhanced sensitivity and specificity needed for the comprehensive characterization of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, once white matter plasticity mechanisms can be resolved with MRI, these types of experiment could shed a new light on brain physiology and provide a whole new definition to the concept of brain connectivity.

5 | CONCLUSION

Over the past 20 years, DWI has proven to be an indispensable approach for the study of white matter. It has provided invaluable insights into neuroanatomy, which has led to the discovery of new pathways, and refinement of what was already known. Notably, DWI has demonstrated the existence of a clear organization and a true inter-individual variability in the way in which the brain is connected, and this variability directly impacts the functioning of the brain. Finally, DWI offers the unique opportunity to directly quantify brain plasticity. However, although the reduction in the gap between direct biological and indirect DWI quantification of brain tissues continues to be a challenge, it is a necessity for future generations who may wish to exploit this powerful technology to gain novel insights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Lauren Sakuma for useful discussions. This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (grant numbers ANR-10-IAIHU-06 and ANR-13-JSV4-0001-01).

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How to cite this article: Assaf Y, Johansen-Berg H, Thiebaut de Schotten M. The role of diffusion MRI in neuroscience. *NMR in Biomedicine*. 2019;32:e3762. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nbm.3762>