Deep Learning Framework for Characterizing Tau-PET Heterogeneity in Alzheimer's Disease: A Self-supervised Approach

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Background

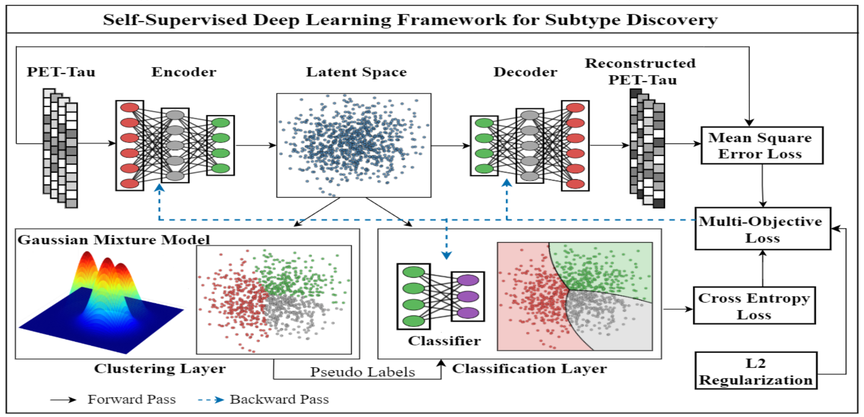
- Extracellular amyloid plaques and intraneuronal neurofibrillary tangles are defining features of Alzheimer disease (AD).
- AD patients exhibit spatially heterogeneous tau-PET composition across brain.
- This cross-sectional study uses self-supervised deep learning to identify tau-PET subtypes and characterize their functional connectivity and clinical profiles

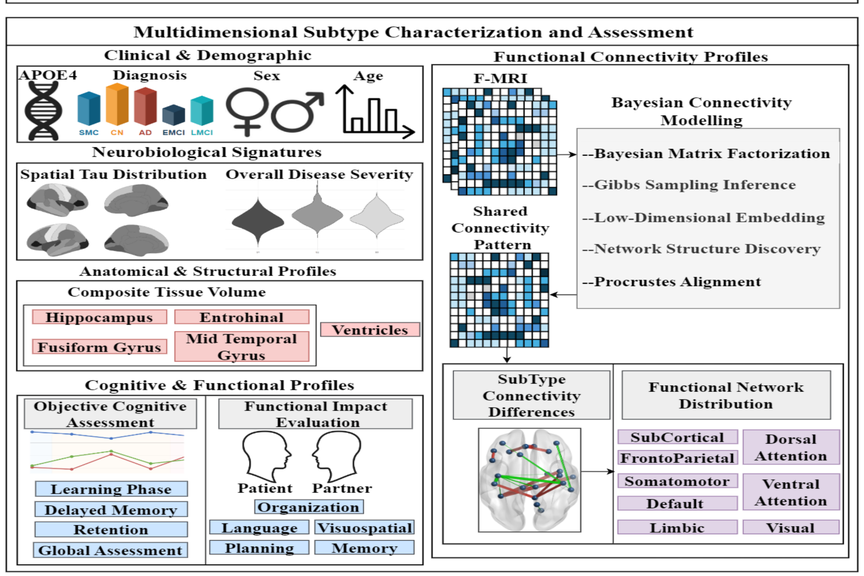
Methods

- ADNI-3 cohort (n=318, ages 55-89): CN, EMCI, LMCI, SMC, AD subjects.
- Tau-PET imaging across 68 cortical regions (Desikan-Killiany atlas).
- Resting-state fMRI for functional connectivity analysis

Stage I Subtype Discovery - Self-supervised deep learning identifies tau subtypes from PET data using Gaussian mixture clustering.

Stage II Subtype Validation - Multidimensional validation across clinical, cognitive, anatomical, and functional connectivity domains.





Results

Self-Supervised Framework – Subtype Discovery

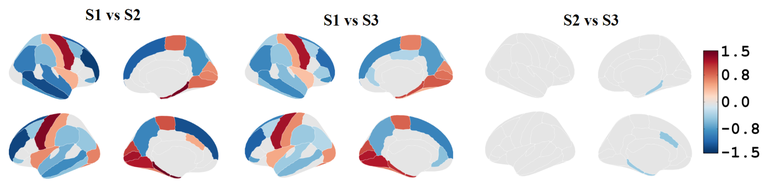
Three Optimal Subtypes

Robust Model Selection & Validation

- 68 cortical regions → 10D latent space for optimal clustering.
- k=3 identified as optimal through multi-criteria evaluation (AIC, BIC, loss, stability) | AMI=0.96 ± 0.09
- Superior stability: 36% lower validation loss variance vs. k=2, k≥4 showed clear overfitting

Subtype Distribution

S1: 67% (n=213), S2: 13% (n=40), S3: 20% (n=65)



Color: Cohen's d, Warm = 1st higher, Cool = 2nd higher

Significant Pairwise Comparisons ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$) across 68 Regions

S1 vs S2 (48 regions): Large effects (d = 0.907)

S1 vs S3 (51 regions): Large effects (d = 0.745)

S2 vs S3 (4 regions): Small effects (d = 0.472)

Functional Connectivity Alterations

Bayesian Connectivity Model Performance

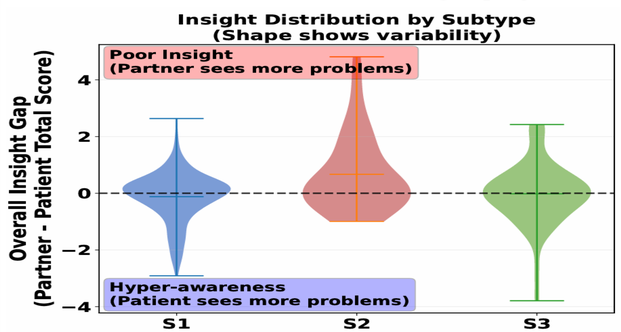
- Optimal latent dimensionality: k=5
  S1 (r=0.84), S2 (r=0.76), S3 (r=0.77)

Three Distinct Network Signatures

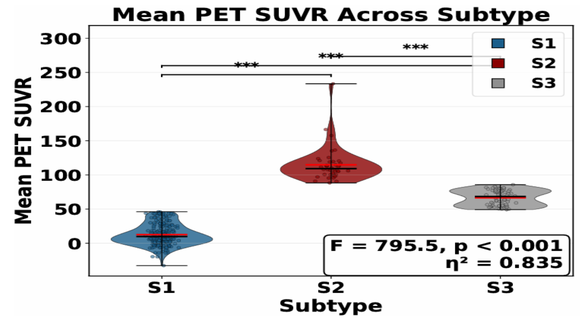
S1: Consistent Somatomotor-Ventral Attention connectivity

S2: Insula-mediated cross-network connectivity (Default Mode + Limbic + Visual)

S3: Default Mode-Ventral Attention coupling + preserved Somatomotor networks



Overall Disease Severity



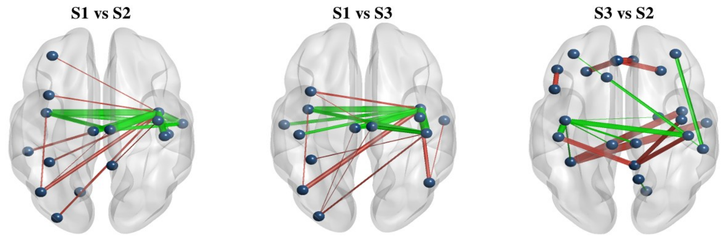
Proportional Tau Distribution Analysis

Three Distinct Spatial Signatures

S1: Visual-sensorimotor-entorhinal pattern
(*Contradicts classical Braak staging)*

S2: Widespread neocortical + default mode network

S3: Posterior cortical as S2 subtype + selective limbic-cingulate



Metacognitive Dysfunction Profiles

Functional Insight Gap
Partner ECog - Patient ECog Scores

Three Distinct Awareness Patterns

S1: Elevated concern about functional decline

S2: Anosognosia-like reduced self-awareness

S3: Highest variability

Conclusion

This study leveraged tau-PET data to uncover spatial heterogeneity in AD. Multimodal analyses revealed anatomical, cognitive, and functional connectivity differences between subtypes, underscoring the potential of deep learning to elucidate AD pathology.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the William H. Gates Sr. Fellowship from the Alzheimer's Disease Data Initiative and National Institutes of Health, P30AG072976.