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Citation for published version (APA):

DOI:
10.1063/1.4917221

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2015

Document Version:
Publisher’s PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher’s website.
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View online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4917221
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Introductory overview of research instruments for recording the electrical activity of neurons in the human brain
Time delay between cardiac and brain activity during sleep transitions

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(Received 27 January 2015; accepted 26 March 2015; published online 8 April 2015)

In the past decades, a phenomenon has been recognized in many domains that two coupled sources or systems exhibit an unsynchronized interaction with a time difference or delay in between.1–6 For instance, neural oscillators have enhanced coupling in delayed-time.2 In particular, this may occur during transitions between two physical or biological states such as chaotic state changes,7 gene switches,4 neuron emission,5 and cardiorespiratory phase synchronization transitions.6 Understanding these phenomena can help, e.g., explore the coherence of neurons and information transmission of the brain in neurology2 and improve “perception-action” planning with stimulus events from external world in cognitive science.7

In this letter, we apply the time delay analysis in the area of human sleep. Neurophysiological mechanisms of sleep are exceptionally important for humans to maintain, for instance, health, internal homeostasis, memory, and cognitive and behavioral performance.8,9 Numerous studies have reported significant association between heart rate (and heart rate variability, HRV) and electroencephalographic (EEG) activity during sleep, where they both vary across sleep states/stages.10–12 Previous studies have demonstrated the presence of unsynchronized changes of HRV and EEG activity in time course over the entire night.13,14 However, the variations of brain activity and autonomous cardiac dynamics should not be independent of sleep (state/stage) transitions, for which their coupling might change. We therefore investigated the time delay in sleep transition profiles between cardiac and EEG activity using a cross-correlation analysis, which was not studied before.

It is known that human sleep consists of wake state, rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep state, and non-REM (NREM) sleep state including four stages 1, 2, 3, and 4 according to the rules recommended by Rechtschaffen and Kales (R&K).15 With the more recent guidelines of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine,16 stages 3 and 4 are suggested to be merged to single slow wave sleep or “deep” sleep since no essential difference was found between them. Besides, stages 1 and 2 usually correspond to “light” sleep. According to one of these manuals, sleep states/stages are scored by sleep clinicians on continuous 30-s epochs by visually inspecting polysomnographic (PSG) recordings including multi-channel EEG, electrooculography (EOG), and electromyography (EMG).

A total of 330 overnight PSG recordings in the SIESTA database17 from 165 normal subjects (88 females) were considered in our analysis, where each subject spent two consecutive nights for sleep monitoring.18 The subjects had an average age of 51.8 ± 19.4 y and the average total recording length was 7.8 ± 0.5 h per night. They fulfilled several criteria such as no reported symptoms of neurological, mental, medical, or cardiovascular disorders, no history of drug or alcohol abuse, no psychoactive medication, no shift work, and retirement to bed between 22:00 and 24:00 depending on their habitual bedtime. Sleep states/stages were scored by two independent raters based on the R&K rules. In case of disagreement, the consensus annotations were obtained. The inter-rater reliability (measured by Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of agreement19 ranging from 0 to 1) in distinguishing between light and deep sleep was statistically significantly lower than that for separating other sleep stages. This is due to the gradual changes of physiological behaviors within NREM sleep.

The EEG activity was quantified by a parameter fEEG, called EEG mean frequency.15 To calculate it, the EEG signals were first band-pass filtered between 0.3 and 35 Hz and then the power spectral density was computed for each...
non-overlapping 2-s interval with a discrete Fourier transform (DFT). Afterwards, the associated peak frequencies between 0.5 and 30 Hz were detected accordingly and then for each 30-s epoch, they were averaged over a window of 9 epochs (4.5 min) centered on that epoch, yielding the epoch-based estimates of \( f_{\text{EEG}} \). The cardiac parameters, derived from electrocardiography (ECG) signals over a 9-epoch window centered on each 30-s epoch, included mean heart rate (HR), standard deviation of heartbeat intervals (SDNN), and the logarithmic spectral powers of heartbeat intervals in low-frequency (LF, 0.01–0.15 Hz) and high-frequency (HF, 0.15–0.4 Hz) bands. They have been proven to relate to certain properties of autonomic nervous system.\(^{20,21}\) For instance, HR, SDNN, and LF are associated with sympathetic activity and the HF power is a marker of parasympathetic or vagal activity activated by respiratory-stimulated stretch receptors.\(^{21–23}\) Many studies have shown that autonomic nervous activity is effective in identifying sleep states or stages when PSG is absent.\(^{24–26}\) Here, all the parameters were normalized to zero mean and unit variance (Z-score) for each recording, leading to a normalized unit “nu.” Note that the use of a window aimed at including sufficient heartbeats to capture cardiac rhythms and to help reduce signal noise so that the autonomic nervous activity can be reliably expressed where a window size of about 5 min was recommended.\(^{23}\) This could also help reduce signal noise. For analyzing the time delay during sleep transitions, we chose 30 s the minimum epoch length because (1) it is the standard resolution for PSG-based manual scoring of sleep stages\(^{15}\) and (2) using a smaller length the parameters could be influenced by the subtle changes caused by the physiological response during arousals,\(^{27}\) which would likely lead to spurious cross-correlation analysis results. Fig. 2 illustrates an example of overnight sleep profile and the EEG and the cardiac parameter values from a healthy subject. It can be seen that these parameters seem correlated with sleep states/stages to some extent.

To capture the delayed changes of cardiac and EEG activity, we constrained our analysis on the periods with 15 epochs (7.5 min) before and after each transition moment where only one transition occurred in the middle of each period. The amount of these periods was 1077 out of totally 28,359 transitions from all 330 recordings.\(^{28}\) The first and the last 5 epochs of these periods were excluded, yielding 10-min segments used for analyzing time delays. This served to avoid the time-delayed effects of the previous and the next transitions when analyzing the parameter values for the time delay of current sleep transition and, meanwhile, to include enough data points for computing cross-correlation coefficients. By these means, we only considered major types of sleep transitions in three “hierarchical” levels, as shown in Fig. 3. They are the transitions: (1) between wake and sleep including W → LS (from wake to light sleep), LS → W (from light sleep to wake), and RS → W (from REM sleep to wake); (2) between REM and NREM sleep including RS → LS (from REM to light sleep) and LS → RS (from light to REM sleep); and (3) within NREM sleep including LS → DS (from light to deep sleep) and DS → LS (from deep to light sleep). These seven types of transitions are of predominance among all sleep transitions,\(^{29,30}\) which can also be observed in our data (see Fig. 3). The transitions between REM and deep sleep and from deep sleep to wake were not included. For each parameter, we calculated the mean values over all the 10-min segments for each type of transition and then they were Z-score normalized. Fig. 4 illustrates the mean parameter values 5 min (or 10 epochs) before and after sleep transitions.

FIG. 1. Inter-rater agreement as evaluated by Cohen’s Kappa [mean and SD over recordings] between different sleep stages. Statistical significance of difference between each two Kappa values was examined with a t-test, where the Kappa had no significant difference between REM sleep/deep sleep and wake/deep sleep and between REM sleep/light sleep and wake/light sleep \((p < 0.05)\) but it was significantly different between the others \((p < 0.001)\).

FIG. 2. An example of epoch-based sleep states/stages over night and the normalized (Z-score) EEG mean frequency \( f_{\text{EEG}} \) and cardiac parameters HR, SDNN, LF, and HF (in nu).

FIG. 3. (a) Mean percentages of sleep transitions over recordings. The average number of total transitions per recording is 85.9. The transitions are indicated with arrows, where the REM–deep sleep transitions are not shown because they account for less than 0.01% of total transitions. (b) Sleep stage distribution (mean and SD over recordings).
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that cortical changes are secondary to changes elsewhere in the brain (e.g., brain stem) or central nervous system. These time differences are sleep state/stage dependent and seem not occurring for REM sleep (i.e., REM-NREM transitions). This also suggests that the physiology of these changes during REM sleep is different from that during wake and NREM sleep. In fact, REM sleep has different physiological mechanisms compared with NREM sleep, where REM transitions are “switch-like” transitions, while the physiological variations within NREM sleep are gradual. The lack of time delay during REM transitions might also be caused by the fact that the R&K rules force human raters to merge REM epochs of 30 s into one REM sleep period if they occur within 3 min. For W → LS transitions, upon a closer look, we found that most of them were in the beginning of the night, indicating the presence of time delay conveyed between cardiac and brain activity during sleep onset. The time delay from sleep (REM or light sleep) to wake could be due to the gradual steps of awakening. Additionally, as shown in the table, the changes of HR seem always later than the HRV changes. We therefore speculate that, to a certain degree, parasympathetic changes (reflected by HF changes) might present slightly earlier than the variations of sympathetic activity (corresponding to HR changes) during wake-sleep and NREM transitions.

As stated, when computing the parameters, we applied averaging or filtering over a 9-epoch (4.5-min) window centered on each epoch in order to obtain reliable parameter values. Fig. 5 illustrates the time delay and the associated absolute correlation coefficient versus the averaging window size. The figure shows that our choice was appropriate where the correlations generally increased and the time delays \( \Delta t \) stabilized along with the increase in window size. In fact, when performing cross-correlation analysis between two signals, using a symmetric linear-phase filtering at the same

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The cross-correlation between EEG mean frequency \( f_{EEG} \) and each cardiac parameter \( x_i \) (HR, SDNN, LF, or HF) for a given time segment with \( m \) epochs is expressed by a cross-correlation function \( G \)

\[
G_{f_{EEG},x_i}(n) \equiv (f_{EEG} * x_i)(n) = \frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^{m-n} f_{EEG,i} \cdot x_{i+n},
\]

where \( n \) is the number of time shifts (a.k.a. time lag) of the convolution between \( f_{EEG} \) and \( x_i \). Therefore, the delayed time \( \Delta t \) can be obtained by searching for the lag leading to maximum absolute correlation coefficient, such that

\[
\Delta t = \arg \max_n |G_{f_{EEG},x_i}(n)|.
\]
window size would not cause signal phase distortion. Thus, the averaging here should not affect the lag sought when searching for the time delays.

Fig. 6 shows the absolute changes of HR (in beat per minute, bpm) during different sleep state/stage transitions. It is noted that large HR changes (4.6–9.1 bpm) occurred during the wake-sleep transitions, while the NREM transitions had the smallest changes in HR (1.1–2.7 bpm). This supports the “hierarchical” nature of the various transitions and confirms the validity of the results.

In summary, we investigated the time delay between cardiac and brain activity for different sleep transitions using a cross-correlation analysis. The presented results indicate that the autonomic nervous system changes generally precede the EEG changes by 1–3 minutes during sleep transitions except for REM-NREM transitions. In practice, the important findings here can be used in future research to predict sleep state/stage changes based on autonomic nervous activity.

The authors would like to acknowledge the insightful comments from the anonymous referee(s). This work was supported by Philips Research, The Netherlands.