**Identification of a Bipolar Disorder Vulnerable Gene *CHDH* at 3p21.1**

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**ABSTRACT**

Genome-wide analyses (GWA) is an effective strategy to discover extremely effects surpassing genome-wide significant level in studying complex disorders, however, when sample size is limited, the true effects may fail to achieve genome-wide significance. In such case, there may be authentic results among the pools of nominal candidates, and an alternative approach is to consider nominal candidates but are replicable across different samples. Here, we found mRNA expression of the choline dehydrogenase gene (*CHDH*) was uniformly up-regulated in the brains of BPD patients compared with healthy controls across different studies. Follow-up genetic analyses of *CHDH* variants in multiple independent clinical datasets (including 11,564 cases and 17,686 controls) identified a risk SNP rs9836592 showing consistent associations with BPD (*Pmeta* = 5.72 × 10–4), and the risk allele indicated an increased *CHDH* expression in multiple neuronal tissues (lowest *P* = 6.70 × 10–16). These converging results may identify a nominal but true BPD susceptibility gene *CHDH*. Further exploratory analysis revealed suggestive associations of rs9836592 with childhood intelligence (*P* = 0.044) and educational attainment (*P* = 0.0039), a “proxy phenotype” of general cognitive abilities. Intriguingly, the *CHDH* gene is located at chromosome 3p21.1, a risk region implicated in previous BPD genome-wide association studies (GWAS), but *CHDH* is lying outside of the core GWAS linkage disequilibrium (LD) region, and our studied SNP rs9836592 is ~1.2 Mb 3’downstream of the previous GWAS loci (*e.g.,* rs2251219) with no LD between them, thus the association observed here is unlikely a reflection of previous GWAS signals. In summary, our results imply that *CHDH* may play a previously unknown role in the etiology of BPD, and also highlight the informative value of integrating gene expression and genetic code in advancing our understanding of its biological basis.

**Key Words:** bipolar disorder, gene expression, *CHDH*, genetic evidence, expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL), cognitive ability

**INTRODUCTION**

Bipolar disorder (BPD) has a lifetime prevalence of 0.5–1.5% in the general populations [1], and a series of family, twin and adoption studies have established a degree of heritability averaging about 70% [2]. Previous studies identified several potential candidates as BPD risk factors, such as genetic variants in *SLC6A4*, *DRD4*, *DAOA*, *TPH2*, *BDNF* and *GSK3* [3], while recent genome-wide association studies (GWAS) and other large-scale meta-analyses further implicated several novel susceptibility genomic loci, including *CACNA1C*, *ANK3*, *ODZ4*, *TRANK1* and *NCAN* *etc.* [4-12]. Despite progress in elucidating specific genetic risk factors, both the etiology and pathogenesis of BPD still remain largely unknown.

Alongside genetic risk architectures, genes that differentially expressed between BPD patients and healthy controls may also play key roles in the etiology of BPD. Recent advances in gene microarray and RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) techniques have allowed researchers to begin investigating the hypotheses that gene expression alterations may involve in the pathogenesis of BPD [13-19], and several genome-wide significant differentially expressed genes (DEGs) between BPD patients and normal controls have been reported. However, only a few overlapping DEGs were identified across different studies, and many of those identified DEGs were rarely implicated in association studies, while their genetic contributions to BPD susceptibility remain unclear at best [13].

An integrative analysis combining both genetic and gene expression data may help to better understand the risk structures of BPD [20-22]. In this study, we performed a series of analyses involving both genetic and gene expression approaches to identify BPD susceptibility genes. First, we attempted to discover potential vulnerability genes that are consistently differentially expressed in the brains of BPD patients across expression studies, and only genes differentially expressed across all included studies were considered viable candidates for further analysis, wherein we then conducted association analyses of the single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the DEGs to identify their potential genetic contributions to BPD susceptibility. We further assessed the genotypic effects of the risk SNPs on gene expression to uncover the underlying genetic mechanisms that may explain the aberrant gene expression in BPD patients. Finally, genetic loci associated with clinical diagnosis are also expected to be related to the so-called intermediate phenotypes implicated in the biology of genetic risk for BPD [23]. Previous studies have reported deficits in cognitive abilities in patients with BPD and their unaffected relatives [24], implying that variation in cognition is an intermediate phenotype related to the genetic risk of BPD. We therefore also tested the effects of the BPD risk SNPs on cognitive abilities.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

***Expression Data Used in this Study***

For the gene expression comparisons, we used two-steps analyses. The discovery analysis includes two RNA-seq studies performed by Akula *et al.* [13] and Zhao *et al.* [19] respectively. In Akula *et al.* [13] study, they performed RNA-seq analysis in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) (Brodmann area 46) of postmortem brain tissues among 11 BPD cases and 8 psychiatrically healthy controls from the Stanley Medical Research Institute ([www.stanleyresearch.org](http://www.stanleyresearch.org)). In their study, a total of 25,017 genes were analyzed, with 1,225 genes having a nominal *P* value < 0.05 and 298 genes showing *P* value < 0.01. In Zhao *et al.* [19] study, they conducted RNA-seq analysis in the postmortem brain samples from 26 BPD patients and 26 healthy controls that explored the anterior cingulated cortex (Brodmann area 24)—a brain region known to be involved in learning and executive functions and psychiatric disorders. In their study, a total of 15,294 genes were analyzed, identifying 789 genes nominally differentially expressed between cases and controls (*P* < 0.05) and 416 genes showing *P* value < 0.01.

The genes showing *P* value < 0.01 in both discovery samples were subject to replications in another two microarray expression studies. The first replication microarray analyses were also performed by Akula *et al.* [13], but the DLPFC samples (22 BPD patients and 26 controls) used for microarray analyses were completely independent from that of RNA-seq analyses. The second replication dataset was from “*Metamoodics*”, an online database (http://psychiatry.som.jhmi.edu/metamoodics/) that consists of a systematic meta-analysis of ten genome-wide microarray gene expression studies on human brains including 57 BPD patients and 60 healthy controls [17]. Of note, there are partial overlap in sampling between “*Metamoodics*” and the other samples used in this study.

In sum, a total of four gene expression datasets were used in this study. All of the included subjects were of European origin. Detailed information including sample descriptions, data quality control, and statistical analysis can be found in the original studies [13,17,19].

***Genetic Association Samples***

The Psychiatric Genomics Consortium (PGC) BPD group recently conducted a meta-analysis of large-scale genome-wide data on BPD in populations of European ancestry [8], wherein they compared BPD patients that had experienced pathologically relevant episodes of elevated mood (mania or hypomania) with control subjects from the same geographic and ethnic populations. In this study, we used summary statistics from this primary GWAS samples that consisted of 7,481 cases and 9,250 controls. Detailed descriptions of the samples, data quality, genomic controls and statistical analyses can be found in the original GWAS [8].

Here, replication analyses were performed in seven independent BPD samples that included 4,083 patients and 8,436 controls, and no overlap was found with the discovery samples. Detailed information on individual samples—including diagnostic assessment, genotyping and quality control—are shown in the **Supplemental Data** and **Table S1**. Most of these replication samples were previously reported in earlier large-scale collaborative studies where they were found to be effective in detecting genetic risk variants for BPD [5,7,12,25]. Each of the original sample subjects were recruited under relevant ethical and legal guidelines for their respective areas, and all provided written informed consents prior to their inclusion in the earlier studies. In brief, the origin and sizes of the replication BPD samples are as follows: (1) Romania (380 cases and 223 controls) [5]; (2) Sweden I (836 cases and 2,093 controls) [25]; (3) Sweden II (1,415 cases and 1,271 controls) [12]; (4) France (451 cases and 1,631 controls) [25]; (5) Germany II (181 cases and 527 controls) [7]; (6) Germany III (490 cases and 880 controls) [7]; (7) Australia (330 cases and 1,811 controls) [7].

***Healthy Subjects for Expression Quantitative Trait Loci (eQTL) Analysis***

To identify the impact of risk SNPs on mRNA expression, we utilized two well-characterized gene expression databases. A brief description of the gene expression resources is provided below; more detailed information can be found in the original studies. (1) GTEx (Genotype-Tissue Expression project) [26]. GTEx contains both genetic variation and RNA-seq gene expression data from a diverse set of human tissues. (2) BrainCloud [27]. The BrainCloud contains genetic information and whole transcriptome microarray expression data from postmortem DLPFC of 261 normal human subjects (*i.e.,* without neuropsychiatric diagnosis). The raw genotype data were obtained, expression data and demographic information such as RNA integrity number (RIN), race, sex, and age were also obtained. The prenatal subjects were removed from the analysis since *CHDH* mRNA is significantly differentially expressed between fetal and postnatal subjects. The statistical analysis was conducted using linear regression, with RIN, sex, race and age as covariates. The GTEx and BrainCloud data are primarily used to explore the regulation of gene expression in the human tissues, and are valuable resources in exploring functional follow-ups of disease-associated variants.

***Cognitive Analysis***

We used educational attainment as a “proxy phenotype” for cognitive function. Although it’s not a direct cognitive measure, educational attainment is correlated with cognitive ability (r~0.5) and some personality traits related to persistence and self-discipline [28]. Educational attainment is strongly associated with social outcomes, and there is a well-documented health-education gradient. Estimates suggest that around 40% of the variance in educational attainment is explained by genetic factors. We used two well-characterized measurements of educational attainment, a binary variable for College completion (“College”) and a quantitative variable defined as an individual’s years of schooling (“EduYears”). College may be more comparable across countries, whereas EduYears contains more information about individual differences within countries. Briefly, educational attainment was measured at an age at which participants were very likely to have completed their education [more than 95% of the sample was at least 30]. On average, participants have 13.3 years of schooling, and 23.1% have a College degree. Recently, a GWAS on these “educational attainment” phenotypes has been performed in 101,069 European individuals [28], and we obtained the statistical results of BPD risk SNPs with educational attainment from their study. Detailed information on the samples, genotyping methods and statistical analyses can be found in the original report [28].

In addition to the “education attainment”, we also used the phenotype of “childhood intelligence”, which is measured by psychometric cognitive tests (Intelligence Quotient (IQ)-type tests). Childhood intelligence is a strong predictor of many important life outcomes, such as educational attainment [29], and is also associated with various psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia, BPD and major depression [30,31]. Results from twin, family and adoption studies of childhood intelligence are consistent with general intelligence being highly heritable and genetically stable throughout the life course [32]. We utilized a recent GWAS of childhood intelligence including 12,441 children of European ancestry [33]. In brief, the age of the children ranged between 6 and 18 years, and the best available measure of general cognitive ability (*g*) or intelligence quotient (IQ), derived from diverse tests that assess both verbal and non-verbal ability was used. Detailed information on the cohorts, intelligence measurements, genotyping methods and statistical analyses can be found in the original GWAS [33].

***SNP Selection and Statistical Analysis***

For initial screening in the discovery sample, a total of 52 SNPs from *CHDH* gene were selected. The *CHDH* gene and its surrounding genomic regions (~15 kb upstream and downstream respectively) were screened (spanning a total of ~63.6 kb). The previous GWAS (*i.e.,* our discovery sample) has analyzed a total of 52 SNPs in this region [8], and we have chosen all of them without any selection bias in this study. The linkage disequilibrium (LD) structure of these 52 SNPs in Europeans was constructed with the R package “*snp.plotter*” [34], and the LD relationship between paired SNPs was determined using *r2* confidence interval algorithm and was showed by gradient color. The genomic structures of *CHDH* gene, locations of the tested SNPs and their LD patterns in European populations are shown in **Figure 1**, andthe SNP information is shown in **Table S2**. For replication analyses, significant SNPs among the PGC discovery sample were analyzed in the Romania case-control sample and other replication samples.

Both Illumina (San Diego, CA, USA) and Affymetrix platforms were used for SNP genotyping in a bulk of the replication samples (details shown in **Supplemental Data**). Control subjects were tested for deviation from Hardy-Weinberg Equilibrium (HWE), and none of the tested SNPs were found to deviate from HWE in any sample. Association *p*-values and allele-specific odds ratios (ORs) for each individual sample were calculated using a logistic regression model with an additive effect. Meta-analyses were then conducted based on *Z* scores combining data from all samples within the R package (*Meta module*) using the inverse variance weighted method under the fixed effects model, which subsequently yielded the combined *P* values and ORs. Before pooling, Cochran’s (Q) χ2 test of heterogeneity was performed to ensure that each sample population was suitable for meta-analysis. As described in a previous GWAS meta-analysis [8], *P* values for replication samples are reported as one-tailed tests and *P* values for all combined samples are shown as two-tailed tests. We used a forest plot to graphically present the individual ORs and their 95% confidence intervals, wherein each sample was represented by a square in the forest plot.

To explain the logic of the study design, a flow chart summarizing the analytical methods and showing how genes/variants were taken forward from one stage of analysis to the next is shown in **Figure 1**. All protocols and methods used in this study were approved by the institutional review board of the Kunming Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences and adhere to all relevant national and international regulations.

**RESULTS**

***Identification of Nominally Significant DEGs across Different Studies***

In recent years, advances in sequencing platforms have allowed to analyze genome-wide gene expression profiling between BPD patients and normal controls, and different sets of genome-wide significant differentially expressed genes (DEGs) have been reported in each individual studies, but most of the DEGs were not overlapped across samples. Typically, people applied stringent multiple corrections in genome-wide analyses, which allowed them to identify extremely significant effects but at the cost of causing false negative results (especially in small samples), that is to say, there may still be true effects among nominally significant associations. Before we are able to increase the sample size to have a sufficient statistical power of discovering all true associations in genome-wide significant level, an alternative approach is to consider the DEGs that showing consistently nominal significance across different studies. This hypothesis has been validated in the genetic analyses of schizophrenia, a psychiatric disorder that shared phenotypic and genetic risk with BPD —— in the latest GWAS of schizophrenia with giant sample size [35], many genes surpassed genome-wide significance in this largest GWAS, but only showed nominal associations in previous small samples, such as *DRD2*, *SRR* and *GRM3* [36-38].

We believe this hypothesis is also suitable for gene expression comparison analyses between BPD patients and healthy controls. To identify the DEGs that showing nominal significance but consistently replicated across samples, we used several well-characterized gene expression studies. In the discovery phase analysis, Akula *et al.* [13] performed genome-wide RNA-seq analysis in the DLPFC tissues from 11 BPD cases and 8 healthy individuals; a total of 25,017 genes were analyzed and 298 DEGs showed a *P* value of lower than 0.01. In parallel, Zhao *et al.* [19] conducted RNA-seq analysis in the anterior cingulated cortex from 26 BPD patients and 26 normal controls; a total of 15,294 genes were analyzed and 416 DEGs revealed a p-value lower than 0.01. There were eight consistently dysregulated genes exhibiting the same direction of disease-associated regulation across the two studies (**Table S3**). Among these 8 DEGs, five genes (*ALDH4A1*, *PBXIP1*, *GALM*, *CHDH* and *TP53BP2*) showed a uniformly elevated expression among individuals with BPD as compared to healthy controls, while three genes (*VIP*, *HIVEP2* and *FAM49A*) were consistently down-regulated in BPD patients compared with normal subjects (**Table S3**).

We tent to replicate these eight DEGs in two additional genome-wide microarray gene expression samples. Among these eight DEGs, seven of them (only excluded *GALM*) showed nominal significance in at least one of the replication samples (**Table S3**), suggesting the discovery analysis is reliable though the effect size is relatively small. Of note, *CHDH*, which encodes the choline dehydrogenase, is the only gene showing consistently nominal significance in all of the four expression datasets (including discovery and replication samples) (**Table S3**). Though the p-values for *CHDH* did not survive genome-wide correction in either study, which is likely caused by the limited statistical power of individual small sample size, the gene is uniformly up-regulated in Akula *et al.* [13] (*P* = 8.11 × 10–3) and Zhao *et al.* [19] (*P* = 2.51 × 10–3) studies as well as two replication samples (*P* value is 4.97 × 10–3 and 3.61 × 10–2, respectively), and seems a true susceptibility gene with a relatively low to moderate effect. To test if *CHDH* is a real BPD related gene, we performed a next-step analyses.

***A SNP rs9836592 in CHDH is Consistently Associated with BPD in Independent Samples***

To date, several GWAS have been conducted in various BPD samples, identifying a few genome-wide significant genes, such as *ANK3*, *CACNA1C*, *ODZ4*, *NCAN*, *TRANK1* and the like [4-12]. However, even these risk genes can only explain a small portion of the genetic liability to BPD, and the missing heritability is still unclear. GWAS is indeed an effective strategy to discover the risk genes, as it could scan the genome with hundreds of thousands of genetic variations and employ the necessary rigid statistical correction as no prior probability of any variant being positive. This strategy has the appeal of a level of statistical significance being clear and incontrovertible, and has been demonstrated successful during the applications of several complex disorders when the sample size is quite large, such as schizophrenia [35], type 2 diabetes [39] and blood pressure [40]. However, when the sample size is not large enough, the stringent corrections in GWAS might preclude the authentic risk genes that only reached nominal statistical associations but obviously showed sufficient biological interest in the illness. This notion is also supported by a recent aggregated analyses [41] which indicated that there may be satisfactory replications in independent samples among those markers passing nominal significance in the initial GWAS of psychiatric disorders, such as *CMYA5* [42], *FGFR2* [43], *CAMKK2* [44] and *CREB1* [25].

Based on this rationale, with the use of a published BPD GWAS sample (7,481 cases and 9,250 controls) [8] conducted by Psychiatric Genomics Consortium (PGC), we analyzed 52 SNPs in *CHDH* spanning ~63.6 kb for associations with BPD, and identified 18 SNPs in moderate to high LD showing nominal associations with BPD (*P* < 0.05, **Figure 2** and **Table S2**). We then tested five SNPs that reflected majority of the discovery association signals in our first replication Romania sample (380 cases and 223 controls). However, the most significant SNP in this region in the PGC discovery sample, rs3774609 (*P* = 2.56 × 10–6, OR = 0.888), showed no sign of association with BPD in the Romania sample (*P* = 0.318, OR = 1.038), and the direction of the allelic effect was opposite between the discovery and Romania sample. The non-significant replication of rs3774609 in our Romania sample was confirmed in other independent European samples (including 4,496 cases and 42,422 controls) reported by PGC GWAS (the replication result of rs3774609 in their samples was shown in their Table 3, the *P* value is 0.107 and OR is 0.970) [8]. We therefore disregarded rs3774609 from further analyses.

Alternatively, we found another SNP rs9836592 which in low LD with rs3774609 (*r2* = 0.078 in Europeans), showed nominal significance in the PGC discovery sample (*P* = 0.00232, OR = 1.080), and was also marginally associated with BPD among our Romania sample with the same direction of the allelic effect (*P* = 0.0556, OR = 1.217). The other three SNPs in *CHDH* were not associated with BPD in Romania sample (rs877484, *P* = 0.156, OR = 0.886; rs6445606, *P* = 0.116, OR = 0.860; rs2241807, *P* = 0.114, OR = 0.869) and were excluded from further analyses. Further genetic analyses of rs9836592 in additional replication samples showed that this SNP again manifested marginal associations with BPD in the Germany II (*P* = 0.0836, OR = 1.209, including 181 cases and 527 controls) and III samples (*P* = 0.0756, OR = 1.128, a total of 490 cases and 880 controls). The marginal associations in these small individual replication samples were likely caused by the limited statistical power, as the effect sizes (*i.e.,* OR) in these replication samples were even larger than that in the discovery sample, and when we combined all the replication samples together through meta-analysis (including a total of 4,083 cases and 8,436 controls), the SNP (rs9836592) showed nominal significant association with BPD (*Pmeta* = 0.0441, OR = 1.055), which is consistent with the result in the discovery sample. There is no heterogeneity among these replication samples (*P* = 0.404, *I2* = 2.9%). To increase the statistical power, we combined the discovery and replication samples (including 11,564 cases and 17,686 controls), and meta-analysis revealed a stronger association (*Pmeta* = 5.72 × 10–4, OR = 1.070). Forest plot for the meta-analysis of rs9836592 on all BPD samples is presented in **Figure 3** and the results for each sample are shown in **Table S4**.

We noticed that the association *P* values between rs9836592 and BPD did not achieve the conventional genome-wide level of statistical significance (*P* = 5.0 × 10–8), and give the herein observed OR (1.070), the results would not become genome-wide significant until the sample size increases to 79,179 cases and 79,179 controls (have a power of >80%). However, as mentioned in the previous aggregated analyses [41], BPD is a polygenic disorder involving hundreds of thousands genes in it with each gene showing minor effect, and there might be true findings among those markers only passing nominal significance in the initial GWAS, but later were confirmed in independent samples. Of note, we did not set up any *in prior* hypothesis of choosing or dropping any SNPs within *CHDH*, but selected all the analyzed SNPs (*n* = 52) from previous GWAS [8] in this genomic region without any bias. Although the result did not achieve genome-wide significance, it does survive multiple correction according to the number of tested SNPs (*n* = 52) in this study (corrected *P* = 0.0297).

Notably, *CHDH* is located in the chromosome 3p21.1, a genomic region that has been implicated in the genetic risk of BPD among previous GWAS [4,9] and individual replication studies [45-47]. However, the SNP (rs9836592) identified here is located about 1.2 Mb away from the previous GWAS loci (*e.g.,* rs2251219), and is not in the core GWAS LD region (**Figure S1**), thus our results are unlikely a reflection of previous GWAS signals.

***The Risk SNP rs9836592 is Associated with CHDH Expression***

The observed changes of *CHDH* expression in patients and genetic associations of rs9836592 with BPD among multiple samples strengthened the hypothesis of *CHDH*’s status as a potential susceptibility gene for BPD. However, these findings do not identify whether the altered *CHDH* expression was related to any specific genetic risk. Considering the known enrichment of expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) among BPD risk loci in human brains [48], it is thus possible that alternations of *CHDH* expression in BPD patients is (at least partially) influenced by the genetic changes of rs9836592. To explore this possibility, we examined the RNA-seq gene expression database GTEx and found that among European samples rs9836592 is significantly (or marginally) associated with *CHDH* expression in several brain tissues, such as the cerebellum (*P* = 5.70 × 10–5, **Figure 4**) and cerebellar hemisphere (*P* = 0.0033). In the tibial nerve tissue, rs9836592 showed stronger association with *CHDH* expression (*P* = 6.70 × 10–16, **Figure 4**), and even among the non-neural tissues this SNP was still associated with *CHDH* expression (*P* < 0.05, **Figure 4**). Across these tested GTEx samples, subjects carrying the BPD risk allele (T) of rs9836592 manifested higher *CHDH* expression as compared to those with the protective alleles (C) (as shown in **Figure 4**).

It should be noted that GTEx datasets include few subjects with brain data (as shown in **Figure 4**), we then tested whether rs9836592 was associated with *CHDH* expression in the DLPFC tissues using BrainCloud [27], which contains more brain derived samples. We again found that risk (T) allele carriers of rs9836592 showed an increased *CHDH* expression compared with the protective allele individuals in this sample (*P* = 0.040, **Figure S2**). We further analyzed if rs9836592 was associated with the expression of other genes near to *CHDH*. In the BrainCloud samples, *CHDH* was the only gene showing eQTL association with the risk SNP, and the other genes were not significant (all *P* > 0.5, **Figure S2**). In the multiple GTEx samples, though rs9836592 showed associations with the expression of some nearby genes in several tissues, they are less significant and less consistent than that with *CHDH* (**Table S5**), implying *CHDH* is the major gene in relation to the risk SNP in this region. Collectively, these results implied that the observed up-regulation of *CHDH* expression among individuals diagnosed with BPD may be explained by some previously uncharacterized genetic mechanisms underlying risk variants (*e.g.,* rs9836592), and these converging data uncovered a potential pathogenic mechanism for BPD with both gene expression and genetic evidence.

***The Risk SNP rs9836592 is Associated with Cognitive Abilities***

To move beyond statistical association with clinical diagnosis and to obtain convergent evidence for an association between rs9836592 and BPD-related biology, we also performed a series of convergent analyses testing the risk SNPs on several biological phenotypes. Considering that cognitive functions were frequently impaired in patients with BPD [24], and accumulating data indicated that many genetic loci associated with BPD were also related to cognitive functions in humans. We therefore hypothesized that if the identified risk-associated SNP (*i.e.,* rs9836592) also affects cognitive abilities.

We firstly tested the effects of rs9836592 on educational attainment, a “proxy phenotype” of general cognitive abilities (correlation *r* ~ 0.5) [28]. The harmonized measurements of educational attainment were coded by study-specific measures using the International Standard Classification of Education (1997) scale [49], and included a binary variable for college completion (“College”) and a quantitative variable defined as an individual’s years of schooling (“EduYears”). The sample comprised 95,427 individuals for “College” and 101,069 for “EduYears”. In this explorative analysis, rs9836592 is significantly associated with “College” (OR = 1.025 for T-allele, *P* = 0.013) and “EduYears” (SE = 0.012 for T-allele, *P* = 3.87 × 10–3), further confirm the hypothesis that BPD risk SNPs are also expected to influence the cognitive abilities. However, the risk allele predicts better cognitive function, implicating a more complex neurocognitive mechanism than expected.

In an independent sample, we also studied the impact of rs9836592 on childhood intelligence in 12,441 children of European ancestry. Intelligence is heritable and gives humans the cognitive abilities to learn, form concepts, understand and reason *etc.* Childhood intelligence is a significant predictor of cognitive change in later life [50], and is also associated with psychiatric disorders [30,31]. Within this analysis, rs9836592 is nominally associated with childhood intelligence (*P* = 0.044), and the risk allele carriers showed worse performance.

Analysis of cognitive related phenotypes further confirmed the role of the risk SNPs in BPD susceptibility and implied it may be functional in the brain. However, as the association results on these cognitive phenotypes may not survive multiple correction, further validation in larger samples is needed.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study we showed several convergent lines of evidence supporting *CHDH’s* role as a BPD susceptibility gene. Across the various gene expression studies we conducted, *CHDH* was consistently up-regulated in the brain tissues of BPD patients compared with healthy subjects. Likewise, the genetic risk variant rs9836592 in *CHDH* gene was significantly associated with BPD across large-scale sample sets, and this allele was found to be strongly associated with an elevated expression of *CHDH* in the human brain. Together, these results strongly suggests that rs9836592 may be linked with a regulatory element that ultimately contributes to the dysfunction of *CHDH* observed among BPD patients. To date, *CHDH* is known to encode the choline dehydrogenase that localizes to the mitochondrion, and RNA-seq analysis in GTEx database showed that it is abundantly expressed in brain tissues (**Figure S3**). Further temporal expression analysis showed that the expression level of *CHDH* is relatively low at early developmental stages (fetal age); as development progresses, the expression of *CHDH* gradually increases in human brain (**Figures S4** and **S5**). A previous Chdh(-/-) mouse study reported abnormal mitochondrial morphology in sperm, suggesting the function of this gene in sperm motility and fertility [51]. Unfortunately, the precise function of *CHDH* in the brain remains unclear at best, but our present findings provide a strong case for further follow-up study to explore its function and more fully elucidate its potential roles in BPD.

To move beyond statistical association with clinical diagnosis and to obtain convergent evidence for association between *CHDH* and BPD related biology, we have performed a series of convergent analyses testing risk-associated SNPs on several related biological phenotypes, *e.g.,* cognitive abilities. Although we believe our deductive, hypothesis-driven strategy minimizes serendipity, it does involve a number of tests. Thus, the potential for spurious association because of multiple testing is necessary to consider. The SNP which showed significant associations in a meta-analysis of diverse independent clinical datasets were tested for associations with molecular regulation of *CHDH* mRNA and to biological phenotypes related to risk for BPD. A consistent pattern of gene expression diagnostic comparison, allelic association, involving clinical diagnosis and cognition, was found in independent samples and in expression of the *CHDH* gene in brain tissue from healthy controls. The likelihood that by chance the same risk-associated alleles would predict variation in each of these independent phenotypes across these diverse samples and always in the direction of abnormality associated with illness is remote.

Although this study presents several interesting results, the current evidence is limited and we are cautious in extrapolating our results further. First, the observed differences of *CHDH* expression between BPD patients and controls did not survive multiple correction in any single study, though showing consistently nominal significance, the effect size of *CHDH* should be deemed as low to moderate (fold changes in BPD patients versus controls range from 1.08 to 1.30). Second, the association between *CHDH* SNPs and BPD in genetic case-control samples is far to reach genome-wide statistical significance, and the effect size of rs9836592 in BPD genetic risk is relatively small (OR = 1.070). Power analysis showed that the present sample size (11,564 cases and 17,686 controls) is underpowered to observe genome-wide significant association assuming such effect size (power = 0.002), and a power estimation suggests that analyses including at least 79,179 cases and 79,179 controls may have a power of higher than 0.8 to observe genome-wide significance. Thus, further genetic analyses in much larger samples are required. Finally, though we have identified the effects of rs9836592 on *CHDH* mRNA expression, we cannot exclude the possibility of other genetic loci on the changes of *CHDH* expression in BPD patients, and the effects of non-genetic factors, such as durations of illness or drug medications, on *CHDH* expression, were unable to estimate in this study.

In summary, our study presents a series of convergent lines of evidence that supports *CHDH* as a candidate BPD vulnerable gene while also providing potentially significant insights into the pathogenesis of BPD and outlining a novel model of identifying further risk genes for BPD.

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

Supplementary material cited in this article is available online.

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**DISCLOSURE**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**FIGURE LEGENDS**

**Figure 1. Flow chart of the present study.**

Based on the analytic results of differentially expressed genes between BPD patients and healthy controls, we systematically studied the associations of the risk genes with BPD in genetic case-control samples. The risk variants were then tested for its effects on risk gene expression and explored for its associations with cognitive abilities.

**Figure 2. Genetic association of *CHDH* with risks for BPD.**

A physical map of the region is given and depicts known genes within the region. Bottom, the linkage disequilibrium structure of the tested markers for 490 unrelated healthy control subjects of European descent depicted as *r2*.

**Figure 3. Forest plot of odds ratios with 95% confidence interval for BPD samples included in a meta-analysis of rs9836592.**

**Figure 4. rs9836592 is significantly associated with *CHDH* mRNA expression in diverse tissues compiled in the GTEx dataset.**