Mentally shifting in time induces a shift in the amplitude of evoked responses

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Through mental time travel (MTT), humans can explore past events or possible futures. One hypothesis is that MTT builds on flexible temporal cognitive maps of events' position in time (Gauthier & van Wassenhove, 2016). Previous studies have shown the implication of the hippocampal-entorhinal system for MTT (Gauthier et al., 2019; 2020), where the sequential firing of neuronal assemblies on shifting phases of theta oscillations codes for spatial position and distance (Dragoi & Buzsáki, 2006). Yet, the computation of temporal distances remains to be characterized. In a novel paradigm (N = 63), participants mentally projected themselves to different dates in the past or future. They were shown historical events, and had to report whether the event would happen before or after, with respect to their temporal position. We found that the further away in time participants imagined themselves to be, the slower their reaction times. This parametric shift shows that distance computations can be captured during MTT at a behavioural level, and grounds the hypothesis of a similar shift in neural responses. Herein, we adapted this task to magnetoencephalography (N = 31). We show that the amplitude of neural responses evoked by mentally projecting in time increased compared to being in the present, but did not shift along temporal distance. This suggests that the evoked response captures the operation of mentally projecting oneself in time, but not the underlying distance computations. Source reconstruction based on anatomical scans is ongoing to identify the regions contributing to this increase in evoked activity, with a primary focus on the hippocampus.

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