



Spatial cognition in mice and rats: similarities and differences in brain and behavior

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The increasing use of mice models in cognitive tasks that were originally designed for rats raises crucial questions about cross-species comparison in the study of spatial cognition. The present review focuses on the major neuroethological differences existing between mice and rats, with particular attention given to the neurophysiological basis of space coding. While little difference is found in the basic properties of space representation in these two species, it appears that the stability of this representation changes more drastically over time in mice than in rats. We consider several hypotheses dealing with attentional, perceptual, and genetic aspects and offer some directions for future research that might help in deciphering hippocampal function in learning and memory processes. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

As pointed out by Hans J. Hedrich,¹ the Norway rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) was the first mammalian species to be domesticated for scientific purpose as early as the first half of the 19th century. With the advent of molecular techniques in the late 1980s and the development of transgenic mouse models, nowadays, mice account for three-quarter of the mammals used in biomedical research.² For this reason, the mouse was the second mammal to have its genome fully sequenced, right after the human genome.³

Historically, the rat has been most commonly used by physiologists, with a special attention given to learning and memory,^{4,5} whereas the mouse

became the model of choice for genetic studies. By allowing the manipulation of specific genes thought to be involved in cognitive processes, the knockout approach drastically increased the use of mice in behavioral research.^{6–8} This has led to the confounding situation in which mice have been used extensively in behavioral paradigms originally designed for rats, with virtually no consideration of the differences between these two species as if they were fully interchangeable (see on this specific matter Refs 4,9–11).

Rodents' abilities in spatial navigation tasks have been widely investigated for decades. This has led to the production of a vast amount of experimental data on brain and behavior available in both species. In order to evaluate putative cognitive differences between these two species, we first present the primary concepts in spatial navigation and discuss the nature of the spatial representation in the rodent brain. We then examine throughout the last sections the interactions between behavior and brain activity that might explain interspecies differences when tested in common spatial tasks.

SPACE PERCEPTION

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, scientists began to investigate in detail the mechanisms

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supporting the ability of animals to find their way back to their nest (e.g., Ref 12). It appeared quickly that the selection of appropriate navigational strategies was primarily determined by the perception of space, that is, by the nature of the cues that could be used for navigation.^a

Cues for Navigation

Cues useful for navigation are of two sorts: external cues provided by the environment (*allothetic cues*) and self-motion-related cues (*idiothetic cues*). Allothetic cues encompass visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory signals, whereas idiothetic cues are provided mainly by vestibular and proprioceptive inputs.^{14,15} Note that a given sensory modality organ can provide both types of information; for instance, vision can convey allothetic information about static environmental landmarks as well as idiothetic cues through the optic flow generated during self-motion.

In laboratory conditions, allothetic cues can be easily manipulated in order to trigger changes in behavior and brain activity in freely moving animals (e.g., Refs 16,17). Conversely, the manipulation of idiothetic cues cannot be achieved without partially restraining the animals (e.g., head fixed preparation¹⁸). These cues are otherwise always available (even in complete darkness) and are sometimes sufficient for an animal to estimate distance and orientation parameters. For instance, Wallace and Whishaw¹⁹ recorded trajectories from rats moving around a circular table top in either light or complete darkness conditions. Although their speed was lower in the dark, rats managed to head to their departure point with the same precision in both conditions. In addition, rats demonstrated knowledge of the distance to the goal as their speed significantly decreased at the midpoint of the homeward trip, regardless of the length of the trip.^{19,20} In this case, both direction and distance controlled the trajectory, independent from the availability of allothetic information. The ability of animals to keep track of their position with respect to a departure point is termed path integration and can prove, to some extent, to be sufficient for an animal to achieve accurate navigation.^{19,21} Indeed, the principal limitation of this navigation strategy comes from the iterative nature of the process, leading to the accumulation of errors with increasing distance traveled.^{22,23}

Although rodents are able to use idiothetic signals to navigate, they usually rely heavily on allothetic cues when available. In general, the visual modality is the most used. Olfactory and tactile signals can also help localization, particularly when

visual cues are less salient (e.g., olfactory-based navigation in the dark,²⁴ cooperation of olfactory and vision,²⁵ and auditory cues²⁶). However, landmarks can be unstable, and allothetic cues may sometimes not be sufficient to disambiguate two similar environments (such a situation is probably more likely to happen in laboratory conditions). In natural conditions, animals combine allothetic and idiothetic signals to navigate, depending on their reliability. We generally refer to this process as multisensory integration.^{15,18}

Multisensory Integration

To assess the relative contribution of each type of information to self-localization, a common paradigm consists of causing a conflict between different sensory sources. For instance, in the experiment by Etienne et al.,²⁷ hamsters first learned to go from their nest to a feeder located in the middle of a 220 cm-diameter circular arena by following a baited spoon directed by the experimenter. Once there, the hamsters filled in their cheek pouches with food and came back to the nest. During training, a light spot was presented at the opposite side of the nest. During the test, this visual cue was rotated by either 90° or 180°, thus creating a conflict between visual and idiothetic cues. If hamsters relied exclusively on idiothetic cues, they would directly return to their nest. If they relied on the visual cue, they would aim at the opposite direction of the spotlight. The authors found that animals did neither one nor the other but chose a position that was intermediary between the one indicated by self-motion cues and the one deduced from the visual cue. Interestingly, the deviation from the actual nest position depended on the degree of conflict between self-motion cues and the visual cues. When the spotlight was rotated 90° (small conflict), the final position was far away from the nest position as if the animals preferentially used the visual cue over idiothetic cues. On the contrary, when the spotlight was rotated 180° (large conflict), the final position was closer to the nest, thus suggesting that the idiothetic cues were given a larger weight than the visual cue. Overall, these results suggest that navigation relies on a weighted multisensory integration process.²⁸ In this context, the contribution of each sensory modality depends on the degree of confidence that can be attributed to them. There are several other examples suggesting that mammals navigate by combining allothetic and idiothetic cues.^{15,22,26,29} In certain conditions, rats can show a hierarchy in the use made of different sensory modalities to guide navigation, vision being predominant

over olfactory or self-motion cues.³⁰ However, the relative importance given to certain sensory sources over others greatly depends on their reliability within a reference frame.^{31,32}

To summarize, rodents can navigate using a combination of allothetic and idiothetic information in a flexible and opportunistic manner, allowing switches between various strategies continuously in the course of navigation.

NAVIGATION STRATEGIES

'No wild animal roams at random over the country; each has a home-region, even if it has not an actual home'.³³ The *home range*^b concept (or *home-region* as previously defined by Ernest T. Seton) has been widely used in order to define the 'area traversed by the individual in its normal activities of food gathering, mating, and caring for young'.³⁴ In the wild, mice and rats show territorial behavior like many other mammals^{35,36} and show *home base* behavior in laboratory settings.³⁷ In this context, home base refers to the location in which the animal spends a disproportionate period of time and from which it performs excursions.³⁸ During this home base behavior, it appears that exploratory behavior is organized³⁹ and that specific locomotor patterns can be identified.⁴⁰

Exploring Space

Most mammalian species show increased exploratory activity when confronted with novelty, and rodents are no exception.^{41,42} This behavior consists of moving toward unknown places or objects and gathering different types of information from several sensory modalities. Exploratory behavior diminishes with habituation, albeit in different ways across species⁴³ and strains.⁴⁴ Interestingly, this diminution seems to depend on the integrity of the hippocampus (e.g., Refs 45–48, but see Ref 49 for contrasting results), a structure known for its major implication in spatial navigation.⁵⁰ Exploration is a central concept in spatial cognition as this specific behavior allows the animal to gain spatial knowledge and build representations of its environment.^{50,51} It is a form of latent learning,⁵² which refers to the acquisition of knowledge occurring in the absence of explicit reward.⁵³

Organization of Exploration

Exploration behavior can be triggered by a wide set of stimulus (e.g., a new environment,⁵⁴ a new object in a familiar environment,⁴⁷ a new spatial

arrangement of objects,^{47,55} or even a change in the environment topology⁵⁶). Novelty detection often interferes with the ongoing behavioral activities that animals have to perform as if acting on the current goal of the animal, prioritizing the gathering of new knowledge over feeding,^{41,42,57} or other behaviors.⁵⁸ However, despite its instinctive component and seemingly random structure, behavioral studies demonstrate that novelty exploration is actually quite organized^{59,60} while still enabling the expression of interindividual differences.⁶¹

Basically, when exploring a new environment for the first time, a rodent will make excursions from its departure point to unexplored parts of its environment, most often following the borders, and regularly returning to a place termed 'home base'.^{39,62,63} Specific behaviors such as rearing or grooming are more likely to occur at the home base.³⁹ The home base is usually the place where the animal was first released in the environment,⁶⁴ but it has to provide sufficient shelter to be effective.³⁸ Regarding this latter observation, Whishaw and coworkers suggested that exploration would mainly serve to optimize safety. Exploration has similar patterns in the absence of visual cues; in the dark, rats placed in a new environment will still organize their displacements around a chosen home base. Their displacements show invariant characteristics, e.g., a dissociation between the outward trajectory (i.e., away from the home base) and the return trajectory (toward the home base).⁶⁵

More recently, a thorough characterization of mice exploratory behavior was performed by Fonio et al.⁶⁰ The authors demonstrated that exploration of a new and large circular arena could be decomposed in several behavioral patterns, the order of which was highly reproducible among individuals. These behavioral patterns progressively take place within the three-dimensional space. Mice first make short back and forth trips from their home base following the wall (one-dimensional motion). Once they complete a full turn, they begin making small incursions inside the environment (two-dimensional) that progressively become independent from the home base. They end up performing jumping movements (three-dimensional). The authors highlighted the fact that in their experiment, exploration was free; the departure point of exploration trips was the mouse home cage, where *ad libitum* water and food were provided, and the time left for exploration was exceptionally long (45 h in total). In common rodent experiments, exploration is forced and constrained in time and space, which might explain why the full pattern of exploratory behavior is usually not observed. The importance of environmental limits (and probably

geometrical information) is evidenced by the necessity for the mice to first entirely explore the borders before performing incursions toward the center of the environment. In addition to providing shelter, borders²¹ and geometrical layout⁶⁶ probably serve as anchor points necessary to build a spatial map of an environment.^{50,67}

Object Exploration

The spontaneous exploration of objects is usually seen as a good indication that mammals memorize and manipulate representations of space and objects in space (e.g., Ref 68 for hamsters; Ref 69 for rats). Indeed, the selective exploration of new objects in a known environment can only be possible if one has previously stored the arrangement of objects in this environment and is able to compare the current layout with the memorized representation. Many studies rely on spontaneous exploration to assess the memory of the nature or the position of objects, which relates to the 'what' or 'where' aspects of episodic-like memory.^{70,71} In rodents, the hippocampus appears to be selectively involved in processing memory for object locations.⁴⁷

Exploration and Task Performance

Interestingly, Olton and coworkers showed the importance of exploration (also termed 'shaping' in that context) prior to testing. Rats that were not given the opportunity to explore a radial arm maze before testing, did not perform better than chance in the task.⁷² Therefore, exploration (or simple pre-exposure to an environment), even in the absence of food, seems necessary for subsequent performance in navigation tasks.^{72–75} As an example, Chai and White tested rats' ability to discriminate neighboring locations in a radial arm maze.⁷⁵ In this task, rats were confined to a specific arm of the maze, where they could either find food or not. When later tested with a free choice between adjacent arms that include the food-paired arm, rats demonstrated preference for this arm only if previously exposed to the entire maze.^{75,76} If not pre-exposed to the maze, the knowledge acquired when restrained in an arm was not sufficient to build a representation of the environment and of the spatial configurations of the maze arms. In that regard, it is interesting to note that in complex environments rats spend more time exploring the topologically relevant parts of a maze (i.e., the intersections), probably reflecting encoding of information on the connectivity layout of the environment.^{56,77}

The evidence reviewed above shows the crucial role of exploration in building a representation of space and, by extension, in developing accurate

navigation strategies. A navigation strategy can be defined by a set of rules to follow in order to reach a spatial goal when one is placed in a particular situation. Spatial information processing can endow the animal with navigation strategies, allowing different degrees of behavioral flexibility and complexity. For example, turning left at the green sign is a response strategy, whereas going to a specific place defined by its relationships with surrounding cues is a place strategy. Although there are different ways to categorize strategies, they share common features.^{13,50,78}

Guidance

In certain navigation situations, the goal is either directly visible or cued. In that case, the best strategy, or at least the less cognitive demanding, is to orient toward the goal and approach it. This type of strategy is termed target approaching (when the goal itself is visible) or beacon approaching (if a cue is located at the goal position) or, more generally, cue, guidance, or taxon strategy. It only requires learning of a single stimulus–response association.

Contrary to most functions described here, it is generally accepted that the hippocampus is not involved in guidance strategy or, at least, that hippocampal lesions do not impair performance in cue-guided tasks.^{79–82} The ability for rats with hippocampal lesions to perform a guidance strategy is often used as a control for nonspatial aspects of behavior (e.g., sensory or motor abilities).

Response Strategy

In some instances, the goal is neither visible nor directly cued but can be reached by means of associations between elements of the environment and actions (each association being independent from the others). This response (or stimulus-triggered response) strategy, also termed egocentric strategy,⁸³ has been first studied by Edward C. Tolman in his search to identify the nature of the information used by animals to solve a spatial task.^{84,85} A commonly used place/response task is the cross-maze task, in which rats are trained to retrieve food from one arm using either a place or a response strategy. During training, access to the north arm is blocked. Animals are then placed on the starting point of the south arm and allowed to consume the food pellet located at the end of the east arm. In this phase, turning right (action) when facing the intersection (stimulus) will be sufficient to reach the goal. During the probe trial, access to the south arm is blocked. Animals are released from the north arm and allowed to choose

either the east arm (place learning) or the west arm (response learning). Similar to the cue strategy, hippocampal lesions do not impair performance when the response strategy can be used to navigate toward a goal.⁸⁶ Conversely, the striatum is likely to be one of the key structures involved in this strategy.⁸⁷ Overall, it seems that in the intact animal, these two structures acquire different types of information simultaneously and in parallel,⁸⁸ at least during the early phases of acquisition of the spatial task.⁸⁹

Routes

When specific actions can be associated to specific states, as in the response strategy, but the knowledge of the state is not sufficient to select the action, one can use a route strategy. The route strategy has also been termed sequential egocentric strategy or sequence-based navigation.⁹⁰ It relies on a sequence of stimulus–response actions, and it can also be used in a modified version of the Morris water maze in which neither proximal nor distal cues are present.⁹⁰ In this task, the animal has to cross three identical intersections before reaching its goal, but the action to be performed at each of these intersections is different. Therefore, a sequence of stimulus–response associations must be learned, and each choice must be selected according to its position in the sequence. We note that a route strategy is more complex than a succession of cue and response strategies because the order of the stimuli in the sequence is important. Many structures are likely to be involved in this strategy, which holds a sequential (and possibly a timing) component. The CA1 field of the hippocampus would be one of the structures involved, along with other cortical and subcortical structures.⁹⁰

Place Navigation

The strategy that probably requires the highest level of spatial information processing is the place (or map-based) strategy. It consists of localizing the goal and oneself using the spatial relationships between elements of the environment. Contrary to the response strategy, it enables flexible behavior, i.e., adaptability in the face of environmental changes. It was postulated to rely on a ‘cognitive map’, as defined by Edward C. Tolman.⁵²

Tolman⁵² suggested that animals can manipulate representations of their environment and that they were not simply stimulus–response machines, in contradiction with the behaviorist approach, largely dominant at that time. Specifically, Tolman proposed that rats could rely on a cognitive map to navigate

or, in other words, a neural representation of places and of the relationships between these places, independent of the current position of the subject. Tolman advanced several arguments to support this view. First, the rats are able to find shortcuts and to perform detours. Second, the rats show vicarious trial-and-error behavior (i.e., rats would occasionally pause and look back and forth at an intersection in a maze) when facing a choice. Third, the rats display several forms of latent learning. For example, that exploration improves further performance in a task⁹¹ is evidence that the animal acquires information in the absence of an explicit reward. Another instance of such latent learning is provided by the observation that rats can incidentally learn what type of reward is available even when not currently motivated for this reward.^{92,93} Fourth, the rats express hypothesis-based (or strategy-based) behavior. This behavior corresponds to a form of learning that shows a sudden shift from a near-random to near-perfect performance, contrary to what is observed with trial-and-error learning. Such a change in behavior would underlie a nonincremental neural process, i.e., a sudden change of hypothesis about the world (see Ref 53 for a review of these arguments).

In the late 1970s, the concept of a cognitive map was amended following discoveries on its putative neural bases (namely, the hippocampus⁵⁰). This updated theory, supported by neural data, led to a large amount of research centered on the role of the hippocampus and related brain areas in spatial cognition. To date, although few criticisms (e.g., Refs 94–96) and reformulations have been addressed (e.g., Refs 97–99), the cognitive map concept offers one of the most fruitful experimental paradigms in cognitive neuroscience.

BRAIN SUBSTRATES OF NAVIGATION IN MICE AND RATS

Given the extensive behavioral evidence of a flexible use of the different cues (see section *Space Perception*), it is fair to assume that space representation at the neural level shows a great dependence on multi-sensory integration. Indeed, such integration is present at the neural level in the hippocampus,^{18,100} where place cells have been first described in the rat¹⁰¹ and, later on, also in the mouse.^{102,103} We shall review in the following sections the principal differences between these two species in terms of hippocampal place cell activity, with a careful look at their basic properties and experience-dependent dynamics (Box 1).

BOX 1

HIPPOCAMPAL PLACE CELLS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SPACE

Since its discovery in the early 1970s by John O'Keefe, hippocampal place cells have been extensively studied in numerous spatial memory paradigms. These pyramidal cells are selectively active in restricted portions of space and change their firing activity (i.e., both firing rate and location) according to the nature of the environment being tested. Therefore, these place cells, along with other spatially tuned types of neurons (e.g., grid cells,¹⁰⁴ head direction cells¹⁰⁵), are thought to provide the rat brain with a unique spatial signature characterizing a specific environment and thereby a memory trace of the subject's place. Originally discovered in the rat,¹⁰¹ place cells have been found since then in other mammalian species, including the mouse,^{102,103} big brown bat,¹⁰⁶ nonhuman primates,¹⁰⁷ and humans.¹⁰⁸ Although there is little doubt on the role played by place cells across these various species in spatial processing, few constitutive differences remain, especially in the primate literature. For instance, it appears that hippocampal cells in the nonhuman primate brain are sensitive to whole-body motion¹⁰⁹ and spatial view¹¹⁰ during passive translocation, while such factors have a somewhat limited impact on rodent place cell activity (e.g., see Ref 111 on the 'local view' issue). However, it is possible that these discrepancies arise from the experimental design *per se* (passive translocation vs active exploration) rather than in any interspecies differences.¹¹²

Basic Properties of Hippocampal Pyramidal Cells

As mentioned in the Introduction, the growing number of mice used in behavioral studies focusing on learning and memory raises the question of interoperability of the various behavioral tests used in this field of research. To this end, Routh and coworkers¹¹³ asked whether the basic properties of hippocampal CA1 pyramidal cells of mice (C57BL/6) and rats (Sprague-Dawley) share common features. In line with others,^{114–116} the authors found larger hippocampi in rats than in mice, this difference being partly due to a smaller width of the dentate gyrus in mice.¹¹³ However, the total number of neurons

might be similar in the two species as the CA1 pyramidal neurons appeared to be more densely packed in mice.^{113,117}

Routh and coworkers found little difference between rats and C57BL/6 mice regarding the cellular morphologies and passive membrane properties of CA1 pyramidal neurons, except for a more hyperpolarized resting membrane potential and a lower resonance frequency^c in mice neurons. As resonance frequency is thought to be directly related to the magnitude of the hyperpolarization-activated cation current (I_h),^{113,119} mice would have less I_h active at rest compared to rats. Furthermore, I_h has been shown to regulate dendritic integration of distal synaptic inputs to CA1 pyramidal cells.^{120–122} Deletion of one of the two channel isoforms (HCN1) responsible for I_h enhances behavioral performance in a hippocampal-dependent task and increases the power of theta oscillations and synaptic plasticity at the entorhinal inputs to CA1 neurons.¹²² This last result is of particular importance given the central role of synaptic plasticity and long-term potentiation in stabilizing the activity of hippocampal place cells.¹²³ As discussed below, differences in molecular composition of HCN channels might be a key component of place field instability generally observed in mice.

Basic Spatial Properties of Place Cells

A cross-species comparison of the functional properties of place cells appears critical in understanding the general principles underlying hippocampal function.¹²⁴ However, there is relatively little comparative information, even for the basic spatial properties of place cells (e.g., firing rate, spatial coherence, spatial information content and place field size). Several nonexclusive factors might explain this lack of systematic comparison. First, over the 40 years of research on hippocampal place cells, the rat has been the dominant model. It is only from the mid 1990s that mice models have been used in learning and memory research, with emphasis on the molecular and genetic aspects but not on the fundamental spatial properties of hippocampal place cells. Second, the wide variety of strains in both species (e.g., inbred vs outbred) and genetic backgrounds used for transgenic research drastically reduces our ability to draw systematic comparisons. Third, no single methodology has been laid down to analyze the various parameters of the spatial discharge of hippocampal neurons. For instance, there exists at least six different ways if only to mathematically define a place field (i.e., the portion of space where

the place cell is active) for all species combined.^{125–130}

Despite all these limitations, it is possible to get a rough idea of the degree of similarity of basic spatial properties of hippocampal place cells recorded in both mice (C57BL/6) and rats (Long–Evans) using nearly identical criteria.^{103,131–138} It appears from this selected sample (Table 1) that average firing activity is similar in both species. The internal organization of the place field (i.e., spatial coherence, a measure of the extent to which the firing rate in a pixel is predicted by the rates of its neighbors¹⁴³) is nearly identical as well. It seems that the main difference concerns the spatial information content, which is a measure of the extent to which a cell's firing can be used to predict the position of the animal.¹⁴⁴ This index is nearly twofold in rats. However, inferring any particular behavioral alteration from variations of this measure can prove cumbersome given its dependency on other variables, such as the place field size. Indeed, numerous experimental studies reporting a loss of spatial information content also report an increased size of hippocampal place fields (e.g., Refs 145–147). However, it is unknown whether hippocampal place fields in mice are broader than those observed in rats. In addition, works performed by Markus et al.¹⁴⁸ suggest that place field reliability is more important for spatial navigation than the size of the place field *per se*. This issue will be developed in the following section.

Place Cell Activity over Time

Several studies that initially explored the relationship between place cell activity and behavior involved lesioning or inactivating specific brain areas (see Ref 149 for a review on this specific matter). Most of these studies were performed on the rat and showed that performance deteriorated when place cell activity was altered.^{150–152} Studies conducted in transgenic mice reached a similar conclusion.^{137,138,153–156}

Aging studies provided further support for the idea that place cell activity was tightly linked to behavioral performance in rodents.^{145,157–159} More precisely, major differences are observed between

young and aged animals when comparing place field stability across days.^d For instance, hippocampal place cells in young rats show strong place field stability over time¹⁶⁰, while aged animals show spontaneous rearrangements of place field locations (i.e., place cells remap) from time to time.¹⁶¹ At this point, it is important to note that the same aging effect has been reported for mice place cells.¹⁶² However, a major interspecies difference is found when comparing place field stability (Table 1); hippocampal place cell representation in mice does show a marked instability in normal conditions.^{103,133,139,140}

Place field relative instability has been reported straight from the beginning of electrophysiological recordings in freely moving mice^{103,133} but has been specifically investigated by Kentros and coworkers a few years later.¹³⁹ Since then, this particular aspect of place cells in mice has been reported in other electrophysiological¹⁴⁰ and calcium imaging^{163,164} studies. In the forthcoming sections, we will review the different hypotheses that tried to explain interspecies differences regarding the place cells dynamics.

Attentional Hypothesis

Kentros et al.¹³⁹ showed that mice place fields are unstable when the behavioral task did not require any particular attention (i.e., the animal was left free to explore an open environment). Conversely, when the animal had to perform a pellet-chasing task or, to a greater extent, when it had to solve a spatial navigation task (i.e., the animal had to reach an unmarked zone in the environment to receive a reward), place cells showed highly reproducible patterns of activity between sessions. This work also showed that a positive correlation exists between the level of behavioral performance and the degree of place cell stability; the best performing animals had the more stable place fields. The authors assumed therefore that attentional processes were responsible for the increase of place field stability.

Such an attentional effect is also observed in the rat but in very particular conditions. Zinyuk et al.¹⁶⁵ trained rats to perform either a simple pellet-chasing task or a navigation task on a rotating arena. The continuous rotation of the arena in a cue-rich

TABLE 1 | Comparison of Main Properties of Place Cells in Mice and Rats

| | Mice (Range) | Rats (Range) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Average firing (Hz) | 1.1–2.27 ^{103,133,136–138} | 0.79–1.73 ^{131,132,135} |
| Spatial coherence | 0.51–0.71 ^{103,133,137,138} | 0.64–0.67 ^{131,134,135} |
| Information (bits per spike) | 0.7–0.85 ^{136–138} | 1.43–2.11 ^{131,132,134,135} |
| Stability | 0.3–0.45 ^{139,140} | 0.5–0.7 ^{141,142} |

room allowed the dissociation of the stationary room-based from the rotating arena-based reference frame. The animals that were trained in the simple pellet-chasing task showed less stable place fields than the animals that were trained in the navigation task when tested on the rotating arena (i.e., firing was more organized in the task-relevant frame). Similarly, Fenton and Muller¹⁶⁶ showed that in a simple pellet-chasing task, place cell firing was not nearly as reliable in the time domain as in the positional domain (i.e., place cell discharge during different passes through the firing field is extremely variable, a phenomenon called overdispersion). Fenton et al.¹⁴¹ showed that attention could constraint this temporal variability of place cell firing.

Overall, Kentros et al.¹³⁹ explain the natural instability of place fields in mice by arguing that these animals pay less attention to distal environmental cues compared to rats. This idea is supported by the work of Eichenbaum and coworkers¹⁶⁷ who showed that place cells in the mice are more easily controlled by local rather than distal cues. In this task, mice were allowed to explore a plus-maze that contained a large set of controlled stimuli, including local cues consisting of a distinctive surface on each maze arm. Additionally, distal cues, composed of distinct three-dimensional objects, were fixed on a curtain surrounding the maze. On the test phase, local and distal cues were rotated 90° in opposite directions. During this test phase, in control mice, place cells appeared to follow local rather than distal cues. However, these results could be also interpreted based on a hierarchical organization of sensory inputs as the local cues were tactile, and the distal cues relied on the visual modality.

Hierarchical Organization of Sensory Inputs

Although attention positively modulates place field stability in mice, it should be noted that this degree of stability remains relatively low when compared to recordings obtained in similar conditions in rats (Table 1). Las and Ulanovsky¹²⁴ speculate that these discrepancies can be attributed to a differential use of sensory inputs in rats and mice. According to the authors, olfactory cues might play a much more important role in place field formation in mice than in rats. Indeed, theoretical¹⁶⁸ and experimental work¹⁶⁹ suggest that olfactory cues might control place field activity to a greater extent than what has been previously thought.¹⁷⁰ In addition, experimental data from several behavioral experiments (reviewed in Ref 171) show that olfactory cues affect a wide set of behaviors in mice, perhaps more strongly than in rats (but see section *Genetic Differences*). Added to

the fact that visual acuity is poorer in mice,¹⁷² Las and Ulanovsky¹²⁴ suggest that rats would tend to develop more visually based maps, whereas mice would develop olfactory-based maps. The relative importance of the various sensory information in shaping the place cell activity in mice remains, however, to be tested more thoroughly.

Another argument presented by Kentros et al.¹³⁹ in favor of genuine cognitive differences between mice and rats relies on results showing poorer performance in the Morris water maze task in mice.^{9–11} This task is thought to rely heavily on a distal cues triangulation process,¹⁷³ although rats could preferentially use directional responding over true place navigation on occasions.^{174,175} Accordingly, rats use complex spatial strategies to find the hidden platform in the maze.^{4,176} On the contrary, swimming patterns of the mice appeared more stereotyped, reflecting a preferential use of sequence-based navigation.¹⁷⁷ This last observation has to be considered along with further results obtained in rats by Clark et al.¹⁷⁸ that show that lesions of the dorsal tegmental nuclei (a brain structure known to contain head-direction cells) disrupt landmark-based navigation in this task. Given the predominant influence of the head-direction system on place cell activity,¹⁷⁹ one can formulate the hypothesis that place field instability observed in mice might be closely linked to an instability in the head-direction signals. Indeed, when comparing head-direction cell characteristics between these two species, it appears that these cells are less reliably anchored to salient environmental cues in mice.¹⁸⁰ Nonetheless, particular caution should be taken in interpreting mice behavioral data obtained in the water maze task as the nature of the behavioral strategy used during training could impact the way results are obtained in the probe trials.^{181–183} For instance, adopting a spiraling search strategy during training can prove to be quite effective to locate the platform, but mice showing such behavior will score poorly in the final probe trial. Overall, it seems that mice use less robust and flexible strategies to solve spatial tasks than rats do¹⁸⁴ but nonetheless show a certain capability to switch strategies when given the opportunity.⁹⁰

Behavioral Factors Underlying Stable Place Field Activity

Exploratory behavior (see section *Exploring Space*) is a complex response to novelty that results from a compromise between the motivation to gather information about the surroundings and the need to avoid predators.^{185,186} As tracking technology improves, it is now feasible to carefully analyze the fine

locomotor elements of exploratory behavior in rodents.⁴⁰ Several studies by Golani and coworkers identified the moment-to-moment developmental sequence of forced^{37,187} and free exploration⁶⁰ in rodents. Forced exploration refers to the procedure where the animal is placed directly into the test box at the start of the session, whereas in the free exploration procedure, the animal has access to both the test box and its home cage.¹⁸⁸

In forced exploration, Long–Evans rats and BALB/cJtau mice show a gradual increase of excursion length when placed in the arena. For both species, path length increases across individuals both within and across multiple sessions, reflecting some habituation process. In contrast, in the same conditions, C57BL/6Jtau mice show a complete reversed profile across the session (i.e., when introduced in the arena, C57BL/6Jtau mice start with full circle excursions and only then proceed with smaller radial movements). This behavior is likely to reflect the greater risk taking of C57BL/6 mice compared to BALB/c.¹⁸⁹ In free exploration, these strain differences are much less pronounced as C57BL/6 and BALB/c mice share common exploratory patterns.⁶⁰

To sum up, in classic studies of place cells in freely moving rodents, the exploratory behavior of C57BL/6 mice appears rather different from that of rats and might contribute, to some extent, to the differences observed in terms of place field stability. It is also important to note that a food pellet-chasing task will likely interfere with the proper completion of exploratory behavior.^{54,190} Therefore, systematic comparisons of place cell recordings in different mice strains showing behavioral differences in forced but not in free exploration (e.g., C57BL/6 vs BALB/c) would shed light on the contribution of specific locomotor patterns to stabilize place cell activity.

Genetic Differences

Although belonging to the same subfamily, Murinae, rats and mice share only 30% of their DNA sequences.⁵ Most of the genetic differences observed between these two species concern olfactory receptors, which are nearly 40% more numerous in a rat's genome. Other major differences involve multiple biological processes such as pheromones detection, detoxification, and proteolysis. Apart from the qualitative differences in genome sequences, rats and mice might also differ in channel subunit composition. For instance, as previously suggested by Routh et al.,¹¹³ a particular subunit composition of h channels (composed of HCN1 and HCN2 isoforms) in a mouse would explain the lower

hyperpolarization-activated cation current (I_h) at the entorhinal—CA1 synapse (see section *Basic Properties of Hippocampal Pyramidal Cells*). Interestingly, Kandel and coworkers¹⁹¹ performed hippocampal place cell recordings in HCN1 knockout mice in various behavioral tasks. They found that CA1 hippocampal place fields in these mice were larger and more stable than the controls. These electrophysiological data nicely complement the behavioral results, showing improved performance of the HCN1 knockout mice in a hippocampal-dependent task.¹²² Additionally, a recent study performed by Bittner et al.¹⁹² showed that active dendritic integration in pyramidal neurons at the entorhinal—CA1 synapse is instrumental in forming new place fields and that similar mechanisms might be involved in stabilizing place cell activity.

To summarize, although sharing common basic neural features, rats and mice do show significant differences when comparing brain representations of space. The relative instability of representations in mice might lead to cognitive differences that are expressed not so much as differences in behavioral performance but as differences in navigation strategy selection. Molecular variants of certain channels expressed in the mouse hippocampus might be directly related to this phenomenon but undoubtedly constitute only a small fraction of the pertinent genetic factors that are at play in space representation.

CONCLUSION

Much of our review focused on the major neuroethological differences existing between mice and rats in spatial cognition. Although sharing many behavioral characteristics in simple exploration tasks,^{10,37} the neural representation of space largely differs between these two species in terms of stability.^{133,139,140,163,164} This last observation correlates to some extent with interspecies differences in navigational strategies used to solve spatial tasks.^{4,177,184} Additionally, it appears that a simple modification in behavioral paradigms (e.g., free vs forced exploration) can induce important behavioral changes within one single strain.^{37,60} On the other hand, growing evidence converge toward molecular explanation for the origin of place field instability in mice.^{113,122,191} More importantly, these constitutive differences appear unrelated to the positive attentional effect observed on place field stability^{139,140} as forebrain deletion of HCN1 does not involve changes in anxiety or attention.¹²²

Additionally, we deliberately left aside the strain issues in our review. All the behavioral and physiological data discussed in the previous section dealt with the C57BL/6 mouse genetic background unless otherwise stated. However, numerous reports stressed the importance of the strain being used in spatial tasks, these between-strain differences leading sometimes to contrasting results.^{9,37,60,113,193–195} Added to the fact that the laboratory environment is likely influencing behavioral results¹⁹⁶ and that interindividual variability in genetically identical mice emerges with time,¹⁹⁷ all these considerations strongly support the need of a greater behavioral and physiological characterization of animal models used in learning and memory research.⁴⁴

NOTES

^a Following Gallistel,¹³ navigation is defined as 'the process of determining and maintaining a course or trajectory from one place to another'.

^b *Home range* is not to be confused with the *territoriality* concept, the latter being the protected part of the home range. However, these two concepts largely overlap in some instance (i.e., territory can include the entire home range or only the nest; see Ref 34 for further discussion on this matter).

^c The membrane potential resonance property describes the ability of neurons to respond selectively to inputs at preferred frequencies.¹¹⁸

^d A place cell that fires at the same location in a familiar environment across multiple sessions is said to show a stable place field.

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