OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Synaptic Plasticity as the Physical Substrate of the Self

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ABSTRACT

Synaptic plasticity is the brain's ability to change the strength and organization of communication between neurons. This report argues that plasticity is a major physical support for memory and personal continuity, while avoiding the claim that one synapse or one brain region contains the self. The evidence combines classic causal experiments, human neuroimaging, the provided Allen Human Brain Atlas and SEA-AD analyses, and clinical neuromodulation studies. In the supplied SEA-AD reanalysis, higher pseudoprogression scores were associated most strongly with steeper decline in memory (Spearman rho = -0.468), language (rho = -0.395), and overall cognition (rho = -0.433). Independent PET studies connect synaptic density and tau spread with cognitive performance and future risk. Together, these findings support a distributed network model of identity, but they do not show that a complete person can be decoded, stored, or rebuilt.

Central question: If experience changes the brain's connections, and those connections help preserve memory and behavior, how much of the self is physically represented in the brain?

1 THE SELF AS A BIOLOGICAL QUESTION

FROM STORAGE FOLDER TO DISTRIBUTED NETWORK

Before researching plasticity, I thought memories were stored in one part of the brain, almost like files on a computer. Neuroscience points instead to interacting systems: the hippocampus helps form episodic memories, the cortex supports long-term knowledge and language, the amygdala adds emotional importance, the basal ganglia support habits and action selection, and frontal networks contribute to planning and social behavior. Synapses provide a bridge between experience and biology because their strengths are not fixed; repeated or meaningful activity can change which neurons are likely to activate together later.

This distributed view also explains why disease can change some abilities while leaving others relatively preserved. A person may struggle to form new memories but retain an old skill, or recall facts while losing some emotional connections. Synaptic plasticity is therefore a strong biological hypothesis about personal continuity, not a complete explanation of consciousness. Genes, proteins, neuromodulators, glial cells, body signals, development, and social experience also matter.

Working claim: The self is not located in one connection. It is a changing, distributed pattern supported by many interacting biological processes, with synaptic plasticity playing a major role.

2 HOW SYNAPTIC PLASTICITY WORKS

THE CELLULAR MACHINERY OF LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

A synapse is a junction where one neuron communicates with another. At many chemical synapses, an electrical signal releases neurotransmitters that bind receptors on the receiving cell. Plasticity occurs when activity changes this communication for seconds, minutes, days, or longer.

EVIDENCE AT A GLANCE

The argument is strongest when causal animal experiments, human measurements, and longitudinal disease data point in the same direction. Each result answers a different part of the question.

Evidence type	Sample	Key finding	Source
LTP and learning	Rabbits; rats	Potentiation lasted 30 minutes to 10 hours; blocking NMDA receptors impaired LTP and spatial learning.	Bliss & Lomo, 1973; Morris et al., 1986
Engram causality	Mice	Reactivating hippocampal neurons tagged during fear learning triggered a memory-related response in a neutral context.	Liu et al., 2012
Human synaptic PET	45 early-AD participants	SV2A synaptic density predicted global cognition and all five tested cognitive domains.	Mecca et al., 2022
Tau PET progression	1,325 adults	Amyloid-positive adults with neocortical tau had HR 19.2 for progression to MCI versus amyloid-/tau- adults.	Ossenkoppele et al., 2022
Parkinson plasticity	55 patients	LTP/LTD-like motor-cortex plasticity differed by levodopa-response group; an acute dose could worsen plasticity.	Kishore et al., 2012
Memory prosthesis	Implanted electrodes	Personalized stimulation improved a controlled memory task by as much as 34-37%, but did not restore autobiographical memory.	Hampson et al., 2018

Interpretation rule: association is not causation. Animal experiments offer stronger causal control; human studies offer greater relevance but usually cannot isolate one mechanism.

3 FROM SYNAPSES TO MEMORIES

ENGRAMS, CONSOLIDATION, AND RECONSTRUCTION

Long-term potentiation (LTP) strengthens selected connections, while long-term depression (LTD) weakens others. In hippocampal experiments, high-frequency input produced potentiation lasting 30 minutes to 10 hours, and blocking NMDA receptors impaired both LTP and spatial learning. These mechanisms help link features of an event, but useful memory also requires inhibitory control, neuromodulators, timing, gene expression, and support from glial cells. A memory engram is therefore a changing network rather than a single permanent trace.

During encoding and consolidation, the hippocampus rapidly links people, locations, order, and context. Repeated reactivation, including during sleep, helps cortical networks support the information. Retrieval can temporarily make a memory flexible, allowing reconsolidation to strengthen, update, or mix it with new information. Forgetting can also be useful because it prevents outdated details from overwhelming decisions and helps the brain generalize.

Key balance: Plasticity must be strong enough to learn but controlled enough to preserve earlier information. This is the plasticity-stability problem.

4 MEMORY PERSONALITY AND THE SENSE OF IDENTITY

HOW PLASTIC NETWORKS MAY CONTRIBUTE TO PERSONAL CONTINUITY

Personal identity is partly built from autobiographical memory: the events that let someone describe where they came from, what they value, and how they changed. Human fMRI studies find overlapping default-mode-network activity during autobiographical remembering, imagining the future, and self-reflection, but these studies identify coordinated networks rather than measuring identity directly. Personality is also shaped by habits, emotional learning, language, relationships, goals, and the body.

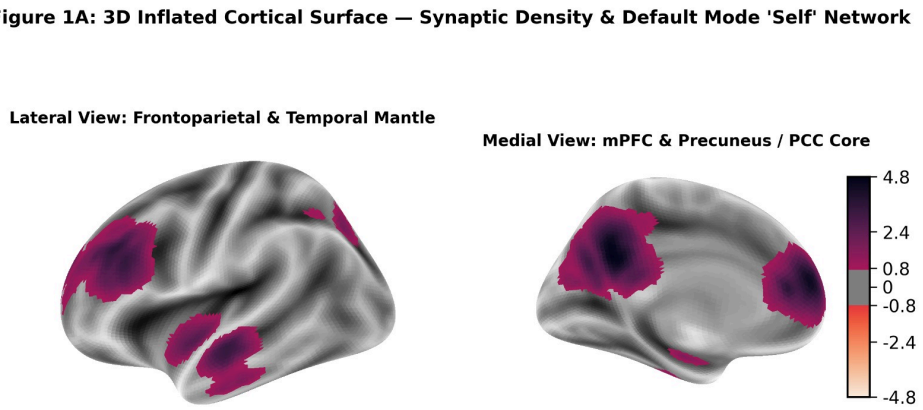


Figure 1. Cortical regions discussed in default-mode, autobiographical-memory, and self-referential research. The overlay is anatomical orientation, not a measured map of the self.

A purely synaptic definition would be incomplete. Molecules are replaced over time, yet patterns can remain functionally stable because cells regulate receptors, rebuild structures, reactivate networks, and preserve relationships among connections. The social and embodied environment also contributes through hormones, immune signals, movement, sensory feedback, language, and relationships.

Careful conclusion: Synaptic patterns are necessary for personal continuity, but the self is an emergent process involving whole-brain networks, the body, development, and relationships.

5 WHAT THE PROVIDED DATA SHOWED

The supplied files make the distributed-network argument more concrete, but they remain exploratory rather than proof of a single self mechanism.

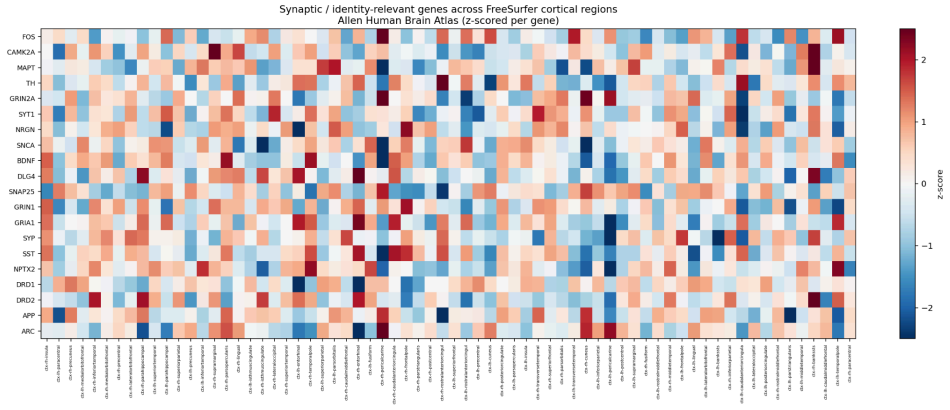


Figure 2. Synaptic and identity-relevant gene expression across 68 cortical regions. Each gene is z-scored separately, so colors are compared within a row.

The Allen atlas contains 3,702 samples from six adult donors across 68 cortical regions. The heatmap shows different regional patterns for genes linked to synapses, plasticity, memory, dopamine signaling, and neurodegenerative disease. It supports regional specialization, not a single self gene or a ranking of which area is most human.

6 ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND COGNITIVE DECLINE

WHEN MEMORY NETWORKS FAIL

Alzheimer's disease combines amyloid-beta accumulation, tau pathology, inflammation, metabolic changes, synaptic dysfunction, and neuron loss. Memory problems can appear early because hippocampal and connected cortical systems are vulnerable. In a human SV2A-PET study of 45 people with early Alzheimer's disease, synaptic density predicted global cognition and five cognitive domains after adjustment for important covariates. Gray-matter volume predicted fewer domains and generally had smaller effects.

In the supplied SEA-AD analysis, 69 matched donors had both pathology scores and usable longitudinal cognitive slopes. Higher pseudoprogression was associated with more negative slopes for memory (rho = -0.468), language (rho = -0.395), and overall cognition (rho = -0.433), while the association was weak for executive function and nearly zero for visuospatial performance. CSF synaptic markers also tracked tau measures, but correlation does not establish causation.

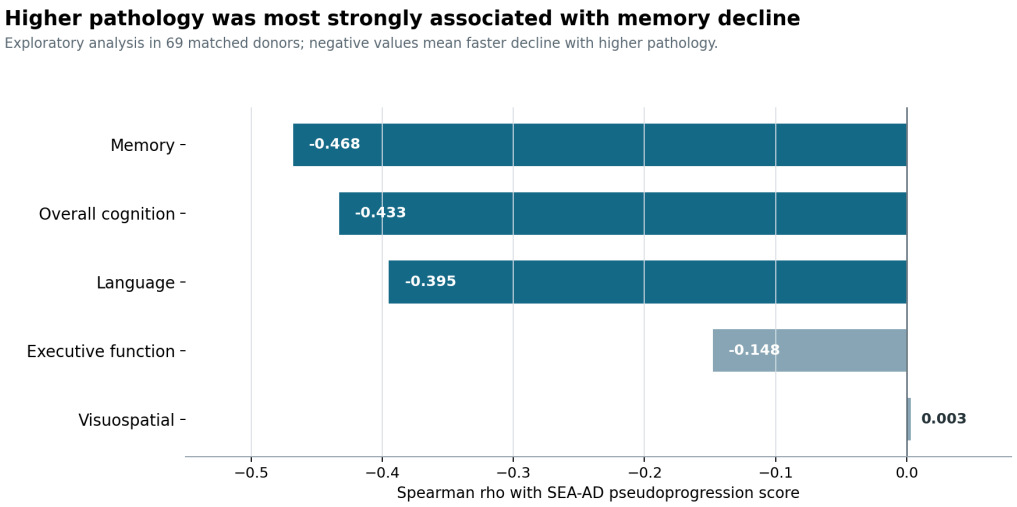


Figure 3. Replotted SEA-AD associations in 69 matched donors. The values show association, not proof that pathology directly caused each cognitive change.

Longitudinal tau evidence adds timing. In a multicenter PET study of 1,325 initially unimpaired adults, amyloid-positive people with neocortical tau had a much higher short-term risk of progression to mild cognitive impairment; the reported hazard ratio was 19.2 versus amyloid-negative/tau-negative adults.

The wide confidence interval means the exact risk for one person remains uncertain.

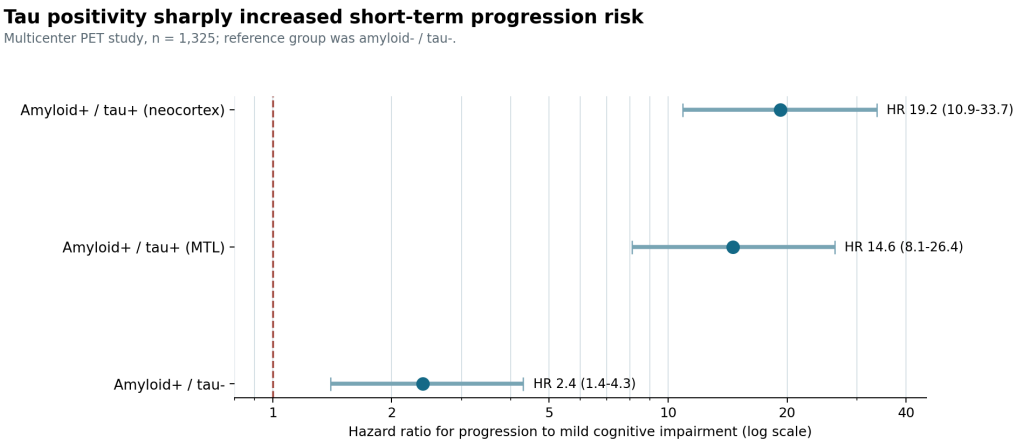


Figure 4. Hazard ratios and 95% confidence intervals for progression to mild cognitive impairment. The axis is logarithmic.

Limit: These datasets connect pathology with cognition, but they cannot prove that one molecular change caused one memory change.

7 PARKINSON'S DISEASE AND PLASTICITY BEYOND MOVEMENT

Parkinson's disease shows that plasticity contributes to action learning, motivation, habits, and cognitive flexibility as well as movement. Dopamine changes the rules for LTP and LTD in basal-ganglia circuits. In a study of 55 patients, levodopa-response groups showed different motor-cortex plasticity, and an acute dose could worsen plasticity in advanced disease. Alzheimer's disease initially emphasizes hippocampal-cortical memory networks, while Parkinson's more strongly involves dopamine and action-selection circuits; both can later affect wider networks.

8 CAN LOST PARTS OF THE SELF BE RESTORED?

Current interventions are more likely to protect or improve surviving networks than to recreate destroyed ones. A hippocampal memory-prosthesis study improved a controlled task by about 34-37%, but it did not recover a person's life story, personality, or consciousness. Reconstructing an exact memory would require knowing which cells participated, how connections changed, and how emotion and later retrieval modified the memory. The realistic goal is to slow synaptic failure, improve access to surviving memories, and preserve function and relationships.

9 ETHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Technology that alters memory could help patients while also threatening autonomy, privacy, authenticity, and fairness. Neural data should receive stronger protection than ordinary consumer data because it may be closely connected to agency and identity. People with cognitive impairment still have preferences and rights, so treatment requires supported decision-making, careful consent, and respect for previously expressed wishes. Disease-related changes should never be used to define a person as less human.

CONCLUSION

The strongest conclusion is not that one synapse contains the self, but that memory and personal continuity depend on living networks whose connections can change. Classic LTP and engram experiments provide causal support; fMRI and PET studies show distributed human relevance; the supplied analyses connect pathology and synaptic markers with selective cognitive decline; and Parkinson's and memory-prosthesis studies show that plasticity also shapes action and treatment response. None of this identifies a single location for identity or proves that a person can be copied from a scan. Synaptic plasticity is a central part of the physical basis of the self, but the self remains a whole-brain, embodied, developmental, and social process.

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This condensed report is an educational synthesis and exploratory student analysis. Numerical results labeled as analysis came from the supplied files and are not adjusted clinical models.