Title: Environment symmetry drives a multidirectional code in rat retrosplenial cortex

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One Sentence Summary:

Retrosplenial directionally tuned neurons encode global environment symmetry even in

local sub-compartments.

Abstract:

A class of neurons showing bidirectional tuning in a two-compartment environment was

recently discovered in dysgranular retrosplenial cortex (dRSC). We investigated here whether

these neurons possess a more general environmental symmetry-encoding property, potentially

useful in representing complex spatial structure. We report that directional tuning of dRSC

neurons reflected environment symmetry in onefold, twofold and fourfold-symmetric

environments: this was the case not just globally, but also locally within each sub-compartment.

Thus, these cells use environmental cues to organize multiple directional tuning curves, which

perhaps sometimes combine via interaction with classic head direction cells. A consequence is

that both local and global environmental symmetry are simultaneously encoded even within local

sub-compartments, which may be important for cognitive mapping of the space beyond

immediate perceptual reach.

Main text:

Self-localization and navigation require construction of a stable directional signal that orients the brain's map of space so as to be in register with the actual environment. Retrosplenial cortex (RSC) is a brain region where internal and external orientation signals combine, as evidenced by the long-established existence of head direction cells (*1*) which are compass-like, directionally tuned neurons that fire according to the animal's facing direction. Recent findings revealed that in addition to these "classic" head direction (HD) cells, in dysgranular RSC (dRSC) there are also landmark-sensitive "bidirectional cells" which were found to express a bipolar firing pattern if recorded in a two-compartment space having twofold rotational symmetry (*3*). This bidirectional pattern was surprising, having not been noted previously, and we hypothesized that it arose from experience in the unusual environment structure, and reflects a general propensity for the cells to detect and acquire encoding of environment symmetry. To test this, we recorded RSC neurons in environments having symmetries varying between onefold, twofold and fourfold. We found that a subpopulation of electrophysiologically and anatomically distinct directionally tuned neurons showed multidirectional tuning that accorded with the environment's symmetry, not just globally, when considered across the whole environment, but also sometimes locally within each sub-compartment. This pattern persisted in the dark and was not due to occult egocentric boundary encoding. Global multidirectional encoding indicates tuning of the neurons to the local environment polarities (and hence is only multifold when all the compartments are considered together), while local encoding of global symmetry means that the global multifold symmetry experienced after exploration has been captured by the network and is re-expressed locally. This enables spatial encoding of the environment beyond immediate perceptual reach, which may be important in building a cognitive map of a multi-compartment space.

Results:

RSC neurons were recorded from 18 rats (Table S1) foraging in environments having

onefold symmetry (1-box), twofold symmetry (2-box) or fourfold symmetry (4-box). Every cell

was recorded in one of the two 1-boxes and in either the 2-box or the 4-box (**Fig.1**; Fig. S1). We

first present the 2-box data, then the 4-box, and then finally the 1-box results which flanked the

multifold box trials.

In the 2-box, we recorded 478 RSC cells from 14 rats (Table S1). As well as classic HD

cells (27/478, 6%, **Fig. 2A-B**) and consistent with our previous work (*3*), we found directionally

tuned cells with bidirectional tuning curves: a twofold-symmetric firing pattern with a 180º

offset between two tuning curves (**Fig. 1A, Fig. 2C**; see Fig. S2 for more examples). This was

quantified with a bidirectionality score and angle-doubled Rayleigh vector length (see **Methods**);

48/478 cells (10%) passed the criteria for bidirectionality. These cells displayed three main firing

patterns. First, the so-called between-compartment bidirectional cells (BC-BD, n = 9/48, 19%,

Fig. 2C; Fig. S1A) lost their bidirectionality in the local sub-compartments (**Fig. 2D**), as shown

by the fact that BD scores were not significantly different from 0 (mean, lemon = 0.15, vanilla =

-0.12, $p > 0.3$ in all cases); however they maintained unidirectional firing (median Rayleigh

vector length: lemon = 0.22; vanilla = 0.23), as the within-compartment autocorrelations were

single-peaked at zero and significantly different from a shuffle (KS test, lemon, D = 0.65,

$p <.001$; vanilla, D = 0.59, $p <.001$). Thus, for these cells only the global pattern was

bidirectional (**Fig. 2E**, cross-correlations significantly different from shuffle, KS test, D = 0.58, *p*

$<.001$; peaked at 174°, circular v-test against 180°, V = 4.76, $p = 0.012$).

Fig. 1. Directional tuning of BD-pattern cells in the 2-box experiment and TD-pattern cells in the 4-box experiment. (A) One between-compartment (BC) BD cell (top) and one within-compartment (WC) BD cell recorded in two different

sessions. Polar plots show the standard seven-trial recording sessions, the box
orientation was sometimes different from that in the baseline (see Fig.S1 for full
procedures). (B) Four TD cells: example between-compartment (BC) TD cells and
within-compartment (WC) TD cells recorded simultaneously from different
tetrodes in one session (upper two rows) and another two co-recorded cells from a
different session (lower two rows). Plots show cell activity in standard seven-trial
recording sessions. Note that co-recorded cells have different PFDs within the same
session. The decoupled HD tuning of co-recorded cells strongly supports that the
firing symmetry is unlikely due to merely movement-related factors of the animal
during recordings.

Second, the within-compartment bidirectional cells (WC-BD; n = 22/48, 46%, **Fig. 1A,**

Fig. 2C, Fig. S2B), expressed a bidirectional pattern even within single sub-compartments (BD

scores above shuffle control, mean lemon = 0.80; vanilla = 0.68; within-compartment

autocorrelations significantly differed from a shuffle: KS test, lemon, D = 0.52, p <.001; vanilla,

D = 0.52, p <.001; **Fig.2D**). Where the two within-compartment tuning curves were asymmetric,

the direction of the large/small peaks rotated by ~180° between the two sub-compartments

(**Fig.2E**, between-compartment correlations significantly different from shuffle: KS test, D =

0.51, p <.001; mean ΔPFD = 188°, circular v-test against 180°: V = 6.54, p = 0.024). A third

category of BD-pattern cells (17/48, 35%) fell below the statistical threshold for directionality in

the sub-compartment analysis, and remained unclassified.

We next increased the level of environment symmetry from twofold to fourfold (the 4-

box; Fig. S1). To avoid possible carry-over effects from the 2-box, we used four new rats, plus

four rats that had previously had nine sessions in the 2-box (total rats, n = 8; cells, n = 660;

Table S1). In the 4-box, in addition to HD cells (n = 75/660, 11%) we saw a fourfold-symmetric

'four-leafed clover' firing pattern, with a 90° offset between four directional tuning peaks

(**Fig. 1B**). These also occurred in 3 out of 4 of the animals with previous 2-box experience (n

cells = 15), suggesting pattern formation through learning of the new environment (Fig. S3). This

fourfold directionality was quantified as a tetradirectional (TD) score, and 67/660 (10%) met the

criteria for tetradirectionality (**Methods**).

Fig. 2. Multiple directional firing symmetries in the 2-box. (A-B) Classic HD
cells. (A) Top polar plot: unipolar directional tuning curve for the whole apparatus
(dark line) and directional behavioral sampling (pale line). Numbers show peak
firing rates. Side plots: Tuning for each sub-compartment showing globally
consistent direction. (B) Top: example tuning curve cross-correlation between sub-
compartments, shown as a line and also as a heatplot. Bottom: heatplots of the

cross-correlograms for individual cells, sorted by Rayleigh vector lengths; maximum at the top. (C) Global and compartment-specific polar plots of a between-compartment bidirectional cell (BC-BD; left) and a within-compartment cell (WC-BD; right). (D) Single-compartment autocorrelograms for the cells in (C) (mean +/- s.e.m.) showing a single peak for the BC-BD cell and double (second peak at 180 deg.) for the WC-BD cell. Shuffle control data are shown as pale gray. (E) Population cross-correlograms shown as line plot (top; shuffle controls as pale gray) and heatplots (bottom), again showing single peaks for the BC-BD cells and double for the WC-BD cells.

As with the BD cells, in single sub-compartments we identified three subgroups of TD-pattern cells: unidirectional, multidirectional and non-directional. First, the between-compartment TD cells (BC-TD; n = 9/67, 13%, **Fig. 1B**, **Fig. 3A**, Fig. S3A) expressed unidirectional but not tetradirectional tuning curves in individual sub-compartments (**Fig. 3B**). Unidirectionality was shown by a high Rayleigh vector score (median, vanilla1 = 0.27, vanilla2 = 0.22, lemon1 = 0.25, lemon2 = 0.32) and within-compartment autocorrelations significantly different from a shuffle in every sub-compartment (KS test, vanilla1, D = 0.67, p <.001; vanilla2, D = 0.66, p <.001; lemon1, D = 0.72, p <.001; lemon2, D = 0.52, p <.001.). Loss of tetradirectionality was shown by within-compartment TD scores near zero (mean, vanilla1 = 0.00, vanilla2 = -0.02, lemon1 = -0.03, lemon2 = 0.03, p > 0.6 in all cases). The global preferred firing direction in each sub-compartment rotated by 90° in successive sub-compartments: cross-correlations of tuning curves from adjacent sub-compartment pairs differed from a shuffle (**Fig. 3C**, KS test, D = 0.68, p <.001) and peaked at ~90° (circular v-test against 90°: V = 7.98, p <.001). These BC-TD cells also did not show a bidirectional pattern in single compartments, having BD scores not significantly different from zero (mean, vanilla1 = 0.07, $t(8)$= 0.51, p = 0.62; vanilla2 = 0.08, $t(8)$= 0.40, p = 0.70; lemon1 = 0.04, $t(8)$= 0.29, p = 0.78; lemon2 = -0.09, $t(8)$= -0.45, p = 0.67).

A second subgroup of TD-pattern cells, the within-compartment cells (WC-TD; n = 29/67, 43%, **Fig. 1B, Fig. 3A**, Fig. S3A) exhibited a multidirectional pattern (usually

fourfold, though occasionally one peak was smaller) even in single sub-compartments. The

within-compartment fourfold symmetry was quantified as follows. TD scores were significantly

greater than the shuffle control: mean, vanilla1 = 0.41, t(28)= 6.03, p <.001; vanilla2 = 0.36,

t(28)= 4.04, p <.001; lemon1 = 0.35, t(28)= 5.31, p <.001; lemon2 = 0.23, t(28)= 1.70, p = 0.05.

Also, the coefficient of within-compartment autocorrelations was significantly different from

shuffle: KS test, vanilla1, D = 0.49, p <.001; vanilla2, D = 0.47, p <.001; lemon1, D = 0.52, p

<.001; lemon2, D = 0.50, p <.001; **Fig. 3B**. The tuning curve peaks varied in size, and the

direction of the largest peak usually rotated 90º between successive sub-compartments. This was

quantified using cross-correlograms of tuning curves from adjacent sub-compartment pairs,

which significantly differed from a shuffle (**Fig. 3C**; KS test, D = 0.47, p <.001) and peaked at

~90° (circular v-test against 90°: V = 13.69, p < .001). The third group (29/67, 43%) were not

directional in individual sub-compartments and remained unclassified. We rarely saw cells with

only two or three peaks in the whole 4-box. Moreover, we did not see any cells that were

directionally stable across similarly-scented sub-compartments but that rotated between lemon

and vanilla (i.e., there was no apparent hierarchy of sub-compartment encoding).

We also recorded the firing activity of TD-pattern cells in the dark in the 4-box (Fig. S4),

finding that 75% maintained their four-way pattern in the first dark trial (n = 21/28), 64% in the

second dark trial (n = 16/25), and 44% in both (n = 11/25). Together with previous findings of a

preserved BD pattern in the dark (*3*), the results suggest that the multidirectional cells were not

solely dependent on vision, and that multimodal sensory information could help maintain their

directional tuning.

Fig. 3. Multiple directional firing symmetries in the 4-box. (A) A between-compartment tetradirectional cell (BC-TD; left) and a within-compartment tetradirectional cell (WC-TD; right); illustrations as in Fig. 2. Note the occurrence of fourfold (90°) symmetries for the global pattern alone for the BC-TD cells, and for both global and local patterns in the WC-TD cells. (B) Rotational autocorrelograms of the tuning curves in each sub-compartment (mean ± s.e.m. = dark gray), compared with the shuffled data (light gray). The BC-TD cell has onefold symmetry (single peak) in each compartment while the WC-TD cell has fourfold symmetry (four peaks). (C) Population cross-correlograms (each compartment compared with the one clockwise adjacent): note peak at +90 degrees, reflecting rotation of the tuning curves to follow the rotation of the compartment layouts.

So far, we have shown that multidirectional cells are driven by a multifold environment

symmetry, how might they behave in environments with no repeating components? We then

looked at the onefold-symmetry trials (the 1-boxes: the open arena and cylinder, Fig. S1), which

flanked the multi-compartment trials. We found that while some cells lost directionality, a

significant proportion became unidirectional: this was the case in both the open arena and the

cue-controlled cylinder for cells that previously had been either BD or TD cells.

In the open arena, for cells that were BD in the 2-box (n = 32; **Fig. 4A**, Fig. S2), we

found that overall, the cross-correlation between the two baselines had a tall central peak that

significantly differed from the shuffle (KS test, D = 0.63, p <.001; **Fig. 4B**), indicating above-

chance directionality at the population level. To quantify this at the level of individual cells, the

Rayleigh vector length was compared with the cell's shuffle in both baseline 1-box trials: 14/32

cells (were BD, 44%) passed the criteria in both baseline trials (median, baseline 1 = 0.12,

baseline 2 = 0.13), showing broad unidirectional pattern, leaving 56% lost directional specificity.

They did not show bidirectional pattern either, only 3/32 cells had BD scores higher than the

shuffle.

We undertook a similar analysis for the cue-controlled cylinder 1-box trials (**Fig.** 1, **Fig.**

4A, Fig. S3, Fig. S5). Eight cells were formerly BD and 65 were formerly TD: we pooled these

as "multidirectional". As a population, the cells' cross-correlations between the two 1-box

baselines were significantly different from shuffle (KS test: n = 73 D = 0.67, p <.001; **Fig. 4B**).

At the single-cell level, 28/73 (38%) cells (26 were TD, 2 were BD) had the Rayleigh vector

lengths higher than its shuffle in both baseline trials (median, baseline 1 = 0.17, baseline 2 =

0.18), while 45/73 (62%) cells lost the directional specificity. They did not show multidirectional

pattern either in 1-box trials, only 1/8 had the BD score higher than shuffle, and 3/65 cells had

the TD score higher than the shuffle in both trials.

Some cells showed sensitivity to cue rotation (**Fig. 4C**) although this was inconsistent,

perhaps due to familiarity of the rats with the room context. To assess whether this narrow

onefold pattern is comparable with the unidirectional classic HD cells in the cylinder, we

compared their peak firing rate, tuning width, and Rayleigh vector length, finding that these

values were significantly different (Fig. S5): multidirectional cells showed a lower firing rate,

lower Rayleigh vector score and broader tuning curves, suggesting that although they had

become unidirectional, these cells were not the same as HD cells (see more extensive

comparison below).

We then looked to see whether the multi-directional pattern we saw could be explained

by occult tuning to the egocentric direction of boundaries, as has been previously suggested (*4*).

Arguing against this possibility, we found that the allocentric directional tuning of retrosplenial

cells was homogeneously distributed in the multifold environments, and therefore dissociated

from the boundary directions which aligned along four distinct directions (Fig. S6A).

Additionally, by applying established egocentric analyses (*4*) to the multidirectional cells, we

found no selective egocentric boundary tuning in either the simple or complex environments:

multidirectional cells generally showed multiple and uniformly dispersed egocentric firing fields

(Fig. S6B-E).

We finally investigated whether multidirectional cells may be a physically separate

neuronal sub-class from classic HD cells. First, and similar to previous results (*3*), more

multidirectional cells were anatomically distributed in the dysgranular rather than granular RSC

(Fig. S7; Table S1). Second, waveform analyses found that multidirectional cells in general had

significantly higher peak amplitudes (ANOVA, $F(2, 101.87) = 7.84$, $p = 0.001$), longer peak-

trough latencies ($F(2, 100.98) = 159.73$, $p<.001$) and longer latencies to the inter-spike-interval

half-peak ($F(2, 94.87) = 33.64$, $p<.001$). Moreover, HD cells were significantly burstier than

multidirectional cells ($F(2, 140.61) = 24.81$, $p<.001$). The results thus indicated an

electrophysiological distinction between multidirectional cells and HD cells (Fig. S8, see

summary in Table S2).

Fig. 4. Variable uni-directional firing symmetries in the 1-box. (A) Two cells
that had been BD cells in the 2-box (left) and two that were TD cells in the 4-box
(right) showing varying directionality in the arena (left) vs. cylinder (right), either

non-directional (upper cells in both examples) or unidirectional (lower cells).
(B) Population data from former BD cells (left) and former TD cells (right) ordered
top-to-bottom by Rayleigh vector; format as described in Fig. 2(E), prominent
central stripe indicates preserved uni-directionality. (C) Two cells, a former BD-
pattern cell (left) and former TD-pattern cell (right), which developed singular
tuning curves in the 1-box that followed cue rotation (denoted by the rotation
mark).

Discussion:

Our data show that a subpopulation of directionally tuned RSC neurons express an

experience-dependent multi-directional code that captures the rotational symmetries of the

extended environment. In addition to the well-known classic HD cells with globally unipolar,

narrow directional tuning, some electrophysiologically distinct directionally tuned cells had

firing patterns that matched the overall environmental symmetry, being one-directional in a

single compartment but bidirectional in a twofold-symmetric environment and tetradirectional in

a fourfold-symmetric environment. Furthermore, while some cells expressed these

multidirectional patterns globally (being unidirectional in single compartments but

multidirectional overall), others expressed them locally, expressing the global environment

symmetry in local sub-compartments. These neurons thus provide an instantaneous readout of

the global symmetry from within each of the sub-compartments.

Two questions arise from these findings: what generates these symmetries, and what, if

anything, are they for? Clearly they are not intrinsic, because fourfold symmetric firing was not

seen in the 2-box, and four- and twofold symmetry has not previously been observed in naïve

animals in simple environments. However, some cells that later became multi-directional

expressed onefold directional tuning in the first 1-box baseline, suggesting a pre-configured

responsiveness to local environment layout. Multidirectional firing was also found not to be due

to egocentric boundary vector coding, and instead driven by allocentric environmental cues. The

symmetries therefore evidently arise from experience of the different environment symmetries.

However, they frequently persist in the onefold-symmetric sub-compartments afterwards,

suggesting a learning process that was initially informed by the global exploration but then came

to affect local activity.

Within-compartment expression of an across-compartment symmetry could potentially

arise from plastic interactions with the HD system (*5*). Canonical HD cells use self-motion

information to establish their globally stable directional orientation (*6*), while the non-canonical

directional cells are sensitive to environment layout (*3*), developing multiple tuning curves if the

environment has multiple identical but differently oriented sub-compartments. A consequence of

this multi-directionality is that different populations of HD neurons become co-active with these

neurons, depending on the global orientation of a given sub-compartment, and this co-activation

could allow new HD inputs to form by Hebbian association.

Interestingly, the four tuning peaks in the fourfold-symmetric environment exceeds a

proposed theoretical threshold (*5*) because previous computational modelling predicted that

while the BD pattern would become tri-directional in a trifold-symmetric environment, the

directional specificity should break down altogether with higher symmetries, due to the tuning

curves overlapping (*5*). The fact that we saw fourfold symmetry suggests potential constraints on

the parameters of the ring attractor that underlies the head direction signal (such as more

narrowly dispersed interconnections).

What might this symmetry-influenced firing pattern be for? On the one hand it may be a

byproduct of having explored a space with multiple similar-looking but differently-oriented

compartments, forcing an unusual plasticity between the visual layout and the HD cells which

" confused" the system. However there may be a deeper functional consequence, in which a

global symmetry experienced when exploring multiple compartments can be re-expressed

locally, for use in constructing an internal representation of a multi-compartment space. Such a

construction, the so-called "cognitive map" of space, relies on recruitment of information beyond

immediate perceptual reach. The ability of multidirectional RSC neurons to capture structural

elements of the whole space (and their orientation) and then re-express them locally suggests that

they may form part of such a mapping, perhaps as part of a compression process to more

efficiently store complex structural information. In a more naturalistic environment, assuming

that different cells are sensitive to different structural elements and that any repeating elements

(such as corners, doors etc) would be irregularly distributed in directional space, the resultant

population activity might look rather heterogeneous to an experimenter and yet contain a detailed

plan of the global layout that could be use by other cognitive mapping neurons.

Overall, our results show that the subset of RSC directional neurons that become multi-

directional in spaces with higher order rotational symmetries form a different subpopulation than

classic head direction cells, and may play a role in mediating between the perception of local

spatial features and construction of a cognitive map.

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Data and materials availability

A raw dataset can be requested from the authors. Summarized data and analysis code are
documented in an online repository available upon publication.

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