Title: Viral-mediated Oct4 overexpression and inhibition of Notch signaling synergistically induce neurogenic competence in mammalian Müller glia.

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Abstract: Retinal Müller glia in cold-blooded vertebrates can reprogram into neurogenic progenitors to replace neurons lost to injury, but mammals lack this ability. While recent studies have shown that transgenic overexpression of neurogenic bHLH factors and glial-specific disruption of NFI family transcription factors and Notch signaling induce neurogenic competence in mammalian Müller glia, induction of neurogenesis in wildtype glia has thus far proven elusive. Here we report that viral-mediated overexpression of the pluripotency factor *Oct4* (*Pou5f1*) induces transdifferentiation of wildtype mouse Müller glia into bipolar neurons and stimulates this process synergistically in parallel with Notch loss of function. Single cell multiomic analysis shows that *Oct4* overexpression leads to widespread changes in gene expression and chromatin accessibility, inducing activity of both the neurogenic transcription factor Rfx4 and the Yamanaka factors Sox2 and Klf4. This study demonstrates that viral-mediated overexpression of Oct4 induces neurogenic competence in wildtype retinal Müller glia, identifying mechanisms that could be used in cell-based therapies for treating retinal dystrophies.

Introduction: The homeodomain factor Oct4 (Pou5f1) is a central component of transcriptional regulatory networks that maintain pluripotency in embryonic stem (ES) cells. Along with Sox2, Klf4, and Myc, Oct4 is one of the Yamanaka factors sufficient to induce the formation of induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) from virtually all somatic cell types (Takahashi and Yamanaka 2006). In contrast to these other factors, *Oct4* is selectively expressed in ES cells and essentially absent from somatic cells, including adult stem cells from every tissue examined. The two clear exceptions are found in gonadal stem cells (Takashima et al. 2013; Uhlen et al. 2010) and during neural crest formation, where *Oct4* expression is essential for the ability of these cells to generate diverse cell types (Zalc et al. 2021; Morrison

and Brickman 2006). This has raised the question of whether *Oct4* overexpression *in vivo*, alone or in combination with other pluripotency factors, may confer some level of multipotency on somatic cells in the central nervous system.

Sustained overexpression of the Yamanaka factors *Oct4*, *Sox2*, *Klf4,* and *Myc* induces teratoma formation, depending on the tissues targeted (Ohnishi et al. 2014; Abad et al. 2013). Transient or low-level Yamanaka factor overexpression, in contrast, has been reported to induce cellular rejuvenation in both neurons and other cell types (Ocampo et al. 2016; C. Wang et al. 2021), although this occurs without clear induction of proliferation or conferring multipotency. However, several studies have directly investigated whether sustained viral-mediated overexpression in CNS neural stem or glial cells of Oct4 alone, or in combination with subsets of other pluripotency factors, can induce multipotency and neurogenesis. Results from these studies are mixed, with *Oct4* overexpression in neural stem cells reported to either not induce neurogenesis (Asadi et al. 2015; Samaneh Dehghan et al. 2015; Sim et al. 2011), to promote formation of oligodendrocyte progenitors (OPCs) (Yu et al. 2021), or to promote remyelination in committed OPCs (S. Dehghan et al. 2016). Two studies reported that viral-mediated *Oct4* overexpression, either alone (Niu et al. 2013) or in combination with other Yamanaka factors (Gao et al. 2016), could directly convert reactive astrocytes into neurons. However, these studies used the GFAP minipromoter to drive gene expression, which has been reported to show ectopic insert-dependent silencing in glia and activation in neurons (L.-L. Wang et al. 2021). This limitation makes these findings difficult to interpret, as alternative methods of validating cell lineage were not used.

In the retina, two studies have reported injury-dependent induction of *Oct4* in Müller glial cells in zebrafish and mice. In zebrafish, where injury induces Müller glia to undergo conversion to neurogenic progenitors (Wan and Goldman 2016), it was claimed that *Oct4* is essential for glial reprogramming to occur (Sharma et al. 2019). In mice, where neurogenic competence is rapidly and actively suppressed following injury, it was reported that *Oct4* expression is transiently induced, but fully repressed within 24 hours following injury (Reyes-Aguirre and Lamas 2016). This raises the possibility that *Oct4* expression may be sufficient to confer neurogenic competence on retinal Müller glial cells. In this study, we assessed whether AAV-mediated overexpression of Oct4 could induce reprogramming of adult mouse Müller glia. While we did not detect any expression of *Oct4* in either zebrafish or mouse Müller glia following injury, we use both genetic cell lineage and single-cell omics analyses to unambiguously demonstrate that viral-mediated overexpression of *Oct4* is sufficient to induce the formation of bipolar neurons from wildtype mouse Müller glia. We further show that *Oct4* overexpression synergistically enhances existing levels of Müller glia-derived neurogenesis in the absence of Notch signaling, partly by facilitating transcription of neurogenic bHLH factors. This represents the first report in which a virally-delivered construct induces direct conversion of mammalian Müller glia into retinal neurons *in vivo*.

Results:
Oct4 and other pluripotency factors are not detectably expressed in Müller glia or Müller glia-derived progenitor cells in either zebrafish or mice

To examine the expression of *Oct4* and other pluripotency-associated genes in both wildtype and neurogenic Müller glia, we analyzed bulk and single-cell RNA-Seq data previously generated by our group from zebrafish and mice (Hoang et al. 2020). Consistent with previous findings (Nelson et al. 2011; Surzenko et al. 2013), we detected robust expression of *Sox2* and *Klf4* in both resting and injured Müller glia from both species (Fig. S1a,b). However, we did not detect any expression of *Oct4* or its direct target *Nanog* (Loh et al. 2006). Similarly, we did not observe any induction of *Oct4* in snRNA-Seq data from mouse Müller glia made neurogenic by selective loss of function of *Rbpj* alone or in combination with *Nfia/b/x* (Le et al. 2024) (Fig. S1c). These results indicate that injury does not induce detectable levels of *Oct4* mRNA or its direct pluripotency-associated targets in Müller glia.

AAV-mediated overexpression of *Oct4* induces conversion of wildtype mouse Müller glia to bipolar-like cells

To determine whether *Oct4* overexpression could reprogram mammalian Müller glia into a neurogenic state, we administered intraperitoneal tamoxifen injections into P21 *GlastCreER;Sun1-GFP* mice to irreversibly label Müller glia with Sun1-GFP (Hoang et al. 2020; de Melo et al. 2012) (Fig. 1a). One week following the final tamoxifen injection, we performed intravitreal injections of either Gfap-Oct4-mCherry 7m8 AAV or Gfap-mCherry control. While neurogenic bHLH factors expressed using these vectors were rapidly silenced in Müller glia and activated in amacrine and retinal ganglion cells, we found that Gfap-Oct4-mCherry remained selectively expressed in Müller glia, but did not induce detectable levels of Müller glia-derived neurogenesis in the uninjured retina (Le et al. 2022). We next tested whether excitotoxic injury could induce neurogenic competence in wildtype Müller glia transfected with Gfap-Oct4-mCherry. To do this, we performed an intravitreal injection of N-methyl-d-aspartate (NMDA) to induce excitotoxic injury and reactivity (Hoang et al. 2020) one week post-viral injection. We then administered EdU for one week immediately after NMDA injection to label proliferating cells. Retinas were harvested and analyzed 5 weeks following NMDA injection (Fig. 1b).

Immunostaining analysis revealed enriched mCherry expression in Müller glia in both control mCherry and Oct4-mCherry infected retinas (Fig. 1C). In addition, Oct4 expression was enriched in GFP-positive Müller glia in Oct4-mCherry infected retinas but not in mCherry control retina (Fig. S2a). We also observed selective expression of the neurogenic bHLH factor Ascl1 in Oct4-mCherry infected Müller glia (Fig. S2b). While Sun1-GFP-positive cells infected with Oct4-mCherry mostly express the Müller glial marker Sox2 (Fig. S2c, white arrows), a subset of GFP-positive cells did not show detectable Sox2 expression (Fig. S2c, yellow arrows). Furthermore, while Sun1-GFP expression was only detected in Müller glia in mCherry-infected retinas, we observed that 5.1% of GFP-positive cells co-localized with the bipolar cell marker Otx2 in Oct4-mCherry infected retinas (Fig. 1c,d). Immunostaining of additional cell-specific markers showed that a subset of these GFP-positive cells expressed the cone bipolar markers Scgn and Cabp5 (Fig. S2d,e), but did not express either the rod and cone ON bipolar cell marker Isl1 or the rod marker Nrl (Fig. S2f,g). We did not observe any expression of the amacrine cell marker HuC/D (Fig. 1c,d), which is observed in neurons generated from neurogenic mouse Müller glia that are deficient for either *Rbpj* or *Nfia/b/x* (Hoang et al. 2020; Le et al. 2024). We likewise did not observe any GFP-positive cells incorporating 5-ethynyl-2'-deoxyuridine (EdU) (Fig.S2h),

indicating that Oct4 overexpression in wildtype Müller glia did not induce proliferation. Taken together, these findings show that viral-mediated *Oct4* overexpression is sufficient to directly transdifferentiate wildtype adult mouse Müller glia into retinal bipolar-like cells.

Oct4 overexpression synergistically enhances glial-derived neurogenesis induced by genetic disruption of Notch signaling

In our previous study, we found that disrupting Notch signaling in adult mouse Müller glia, either by selective deletion of the transcriptional effector *Rbpj* or by combined disruption of *Notch1* and *Notch2*, induces transdifferentiation into bipolar and amacrine-like cells (Le et al. 2024). To further characterize the effects of *Oct4* overexpression in the absence of Notch signaling, we first used *GlastCreER;Rbpj^{lox/lox};Sun1-GFP* mice to genetically label Müller glia while disrupting *Rbpj* function (Fig. 2a). We then performed intravitreal injection of either control or *Oct4* overexpression constructs, followed by NMDA and EdU injection as performed for *GlastCreER;Sun1-GFP* mice. Retinas were collected 5 weeks following NMDA treatment (Fig. 2b). Immunostaining confirmed selective expression of Oct4 protein in GFP-positive Müller glia of Oct4-mCherry infected retinas, but not in mCherry-infected controls (Fig. S2i). We observed that many GFP-positive cells in Oct4-mCherry-infected retinas did not express the Müller glial marker Sox9 (Fig. S2j, yellow arrows), which suggests that they have lost their glial identity.

Five weeks following NMDA injury, we observed 4.5% of GFP-positive cells in retinas of mCherry-infected controls expressed the bipolar cell marker Otx2, while 0.7% expressed the amacrine cell marker HuC/D (Fig. 2c,d). These levels of neurogenesis are consistent with previous findings in uninfected retinas (Le et al. 2024). In contrast, we observe 24.3% of GFP-positive cells expressing Otx2 in Oct4-mCherry-infected retinas, representing a significant (p < 0.0001) increase relative to control. However, we did not observe a significant change in the relative fraction of GFP/HuC/D-double-positive cells. As observed in wild-type retinas, no EdU incorporation was detected in Oct4-expressing Müller glia (Fig. S2k), indicating that the observed neurogenesis is due to direct transdifferentiation of Müller glia into retinal neuron-like cells, rather than through reprogramming to a proliferative neuronal progenitor-like state.

Next, we tested whether Oct4 overexpression could further enhance neurogenesis in other cell-specific mutants that induce neurogenic competence in adult Müller glia. We have previously observed Müller glia-specific *Notch1/2* double mutants phenocopy neurogenesis seen in Rbpj mutants (Le et al. 2024). To do this, we used *GlastCreER;Notch1^{lox/lox};Notch2^{lox/lox};Sun1-GFP* mice (Fig. S3a), and analyzed the effect of Oct4 overexpression using the same protocol previously described for wildtype and *Rbpj* mutants (Fig. S3b). We observed 15.8% of GFP+ Müller glia colocalized with Otx2 in Oct4-mCherry-infected retinas compared to 6.6% GFP/Otx2+ cells in samples infected with control mCherry vector (Fig. S3c). Infection with Oct4-mCherry vector induced both Ascl1 (Fig. S3d) and Oct4 (Fig. S3e) expression selectively in *Notch1/2*-deficient Müller glia.

Finally, we also tested whether Oct4 overexpression could enhance Müller glia-derived neurogenesis induced by selective loss of function of the transcription factors *Nfia*, *Nfib*, and *Nfix* (Hoang et al. 2020). *GlastCreER;Nfia^{lox/lox};Nfib^{lox/lox};Nfix^{lox/lox};Sun1-GFP* mice (Fig. S4a)

were infected with both mCherry and Oct4-mCherry vectors as previously described, and harvested at 5 weeks following NMDA infection (Fig. S4b). However, we observed only very limited coexpression of mCherry and GFP following infection with either construct (Fig. S4c), indicating that NFI factors may be required for appropriate glial-specific expression of the GFAP minipromoter construct, as suggested by previous studies in astrocytes (Cebolla and Vallejo 2006).

Oct4 overexpression promotes expression of reactive glial markers and neurogenic bHLH factors

To gain insight into the mechanism by which Oct4 stimulates neurogenesis in *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia, we conducted single-cell (sc)RNA-Seq analysis of GFP-positive cells FACS-isolated from retinas of *GlastCreER;Rbpj$^{lox/lox}$;Sun1-GFP* mice infected with either GFAP-mCherry control or GFAP-Oct4-mCherry virus. Retinas were tamoxifen- and NMDA-treated as described in Figure 2, and GFP-positive cells isolated at 8 weeks following NMDA treatment (Fig. 3a). We profiled 12,143 GFP+ cells from control-infected and 14,612 GFP+ cells from Oct4-mCherry-infected retinas (Fig. 3b). In both samples, we observe a clear differentiation trajectory connecting Müller glia, neurogenic Müller glia-derived progenitor cells (MGPCs), and differentiating amacrine and bipolar cells (Fig. 3b). Oct4-infected retinas consistently show substantially higher fractions of bipolar cells (20.5 % vs. 2.7 %), and a smaller fraction of Müller glia (71.4 % vs. 88.2 %), consistent with immunohistochemical data (Fig. 3c).

Selective molecular markers could readily distinguish Müller glia (*Glul*, *Apoe*, *Vim*, *Clu*, *Rlbp1*) from neurogenic MGPCs (*Neurog2*, *Ascl1*, *Sox4*, *Hes6*, *Dll1*), and clearly identified differentiating bipolar (*Otx2*, *Pcp2*, *Pcp4*, *Car10*, *Gabrb3*) and amacrine-like cells (*Nrxn1*, *Tfap2b*, *Nrg1*, *Snap25*) (Fig. 3d-f, Fig.S5, Table ST1). In both MGs and MGPCs, we observed substantial differences in gene expression between samples infected with control and Oct4-mCherry samples. Oct4-infected Müller glia selectively downregulated genes specific to resting Müller glia (*Car2*, *Dkk3*, *Glul*, *Col23a1, Abca8a*), and upregulated genes enriched in reactive glia (*Gfap*, *Socs3*, *Nupr1*, *Mt1/2/3*, *Fos*, *Jun*, *Klf6*) (Fig. 3e,f, Table ST1). In MGPCs, Oct4 also downregulated both transcription factors (*Lhx2*, *Hopx*) and other genes (*Apoe*, *Dio1*, *Il33*, *Espn*) that are enriched in resting Müller glia, and upregulated many genes selectively expressed in activated glia (*Mt1/2/3*, *Fos*, *Jun*, *Nupr1, Socs3*). In addition, Oct4-infected MGPCs expressed consistently higher levels of neurogenic bHLH factors (*Ascl1*, *Neurog2*, *Hes6*), promote bipolar cell specification (*Otx2*), or otherwise broadly promote neurogenesis (*Insm1*, *Dll3*, *Mybl1*) or are selectively expressed in late-stage neurogenic progenitors in the developing retina (*Gadd45a*, *Btg2*) (Clark et al. 2019) (Fig. 3e,f, Table ST1). These findings imply that Oct4 enhances bipolar cell formation in *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia potentially by repressing expression of genes that promote quiescence such as *Lhx2* (de Melo et al. 2016, 2018), increasing expression of genes that broadly promote neurogenesis, and selectively increasing expression of the bipolar cell-promoting factor *Otx2* (Chan et al. 2020; S. Wang et al. 2014).

Single-cell multiomic analysis identifies targets of Oct4 in wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia

To further investigate the mechanism by which Oct4 promotes neurogenesis, we conducted simultaneous single-nucleus (sn)RNA-Seq and ATAC-Seq on GFP-positive cells from both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia infected with either control or Oct4-mCherry vectors at 8 weeks following NMDA injection (Fig. 4a). UMAP analysis of integrated cellular snRNA/ATAC-Seq profiles was then used to identify cell clusters. Müller glia were distributed in essentially separate Müller glia clusters specific to wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient animals, with MGPCs giving rise to bipolar and amacrine cells (Fig. 4b,c). As expected, *Oct4* overexpression induces formation of small numbers of bipolar cells from wildtype Müller glia, and substantially enhances bipolar cell generation from *Rbpj*-deficient MGPC (Fig. 4d, Fig. S6). Although small numbers of rod and cone photoreceptors are detected in this analysis, their proportions do not substantially change between treatment conditions, and therefore likely represent cellular contaminants.

Oct4 overexpression leads to significant changes in gene expression in both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia. The transition from resting to neurogenic MGPCs to bipolar cells is associated with downregulation of genes that are specifically expressed in resting Müller glia, including *Aqp4, Hes1, Tcf7l2,* and *Lhx2* (Fig. 4e,f, Table ST2). Motif analysis likewise showed that chromatin accessibility is reduced for target motifs for transcription factors that maintain glial quiescence such as Nfia/b/x and Lhx2 (Fig. 4g, Fig. S6, Table ST2). MGPCs likewise show increased accessibility at Stat1/3 motifs, as well as target motifs for neurogenic transcription factors such as Ascl1, Neurog2, and Neurod1 (Fig. 4g), consistent with previous studies of MGPCs generated from Nfia/b/x and Rbpj-deficient Müller glia (Hoang et al. 2020; Le et al. 2024).

Oct4 overexpression in both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia clusters respectively induces upregulation of 534 and 1657 genes, while respectively downregulating 439 and 824 genes (Fig. 4h). A total of 156 genes are upregulated in both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia, while 63 genes are downregulated. In both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia, Oct4 upregulates multiple classes of ion channels, including mechanosensitive (*Piezo2*), Trp (*Trpm*1, *Trpm*3), and chloride channels (*Clca3a1*, *Clca3a2*), as well as GABA receptors (*Gabra4*, *Gabrb1*), cyclic nucleotide phosphodiesterases (*Pde8b*, *Pde11a*), and the neuropeptide *Npy*. *Oct4* overexpression also selectively downregulates multiple inflammation-associated genes (*B2m, H2-D1*), small GTPases (*Gbp2, Igtp, Irgm2, Rab13, Rgs20, Tgtp2*), along with the glycolytic enzyme *Gapdh* and many ribosomal subunits (Fig. 4h, Table ST3). This functionally diverse range of genes that are not prominently expressed in retinal progenitors, and whose role in controlling neurogenic competence remains to be investigated.

Oct4 also differentially regulates multiple transcription factors in both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia. As expected, *Pou5f1* mRNA is strongly upregulated (Fig. 4e,h), with increased chromatin accessibility also being observed at the endogenous *Pou5f1* promoter, indicating that Oct4 stimulates its own expression in Müller glia (Fig. 4i, Table ST4). *Oct4* overexpression likewise robustly upregulates both the transcription factor *Rfx4* and accessibility at its endogenous promoter (Fig. 4e,h,i, Table ST4). Overexpression of *Rfx4* is sufficient to induce neurogenesis when overexpressed in human embryonic stem cells (Choi et al. 2024;

Joung et al. 2024). *Rfx4* is not detectably expressed in developing mouse retina (Clark et al. 2019), indicating that Oct4-dependent induction of neurogenesis may occur at least in part by mechanisms other than simply inducing dedifferentiation to a retinal progenitor-like state.

Several other transcription factors are only differentially regulated following *Oct4* overexpression in *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia. One notable upregulated transcription factor is Klf4, which cooperates with Oct4 to induce pluripotency (Takahashi and Yamanaka 2006). Stat1, in contrast, which inhibits neurogenesis induced by Ascl1 overexpression in Müller glia (Jorstad et al. 2020), is selectively downregulated in *Rbp*j-deficient Müller glia (Fig. 4h, Table ST3).

Analysis of changes in chromatin accessibility induced by Oct4 reveals that the consensus motif for Oct4 and its close variant Pit1 (Pou1f1) show the strongest increase in accessibility, followed by Rfx family motifs (Fig. 4j,Table ST5). Both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient MG show increased accessibility associated with Sox2, which directly interacts with Oct4 and cooperates to induce pluripotency (Rizzino 2013). While Oct4 does not significantly upregulate the pluripotency factor *Klf4* in wildtype Müller glia, it robustly induces *Klf4* expression *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia, and likewise selectively induces accessibility at Klf4 consensus motif sites (Fig. 4j). In addition, *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia also show smaller but still significant increases in accessibility at target sites for the proneural factor Neurog2 and the neurogenic factor Insm1 (Lyu et al. 2021), identifying additional mechanisms by which Oct4 might synergistically enhance neurogenesis (Fig. 4j, Table ST5).

Discussion:
In this study, we demonstrate that AAV-mediated overexpression of Oct4 is sufficient to induce neurogenic competence in wildtype Müller glia in adult mice, and to synergistically enhance neurogenesis induced by genetic disruption of Notch signaling. Oct4 overexpression does not induce proliferation or a general dedifferentiation to a retinal progenitor-like state but instead promotes direct glia-to-bipolar cell transdifferentiation by simultaneously upregulating expression of neurogenic bHLH factors and the bipolar cell promoting factor *Otx2*. Additionally, Oct4 upregulates expression of the neurogenic transcription factor Rfx4, which is not expressed during retinal development, and accomplishes this in part by broadly increasing chromatin accessibility at predicted regulatory sites associated with these genes.

While we do not detect endogenous Oct4 expression in either resting or neurogenic Müller glia, the fact that these cells express robust levels of *Sox2* and *Klf4* implies that they may already be particularly susceptible to partial reprogramming induced by Oct4. Our results contrast with two previous reports, which originally motivated us to carry out this work. A previous study in zebrafish showed weak levels of the Oct4 homolog *pou5f3* in resting glia, with these levels increasing dramatically following injury and reported detecting *pou5f3* expression using qRT-PCR, immunoblotting, and *in situ* hybridization (Sharma et al. 2019). We remain unclear as to why we were unable to detect pou5f3 expression in zebrafish Müller glia in any of the many bulk and single-cell RNA-Seq samples we profiled (Hoang et al. 2020). We also did not detect the previously reported low levels of injury-induced *Oct4* expression in mouse Müller glia (Reyes-Aguirre and Lamas 2016), as these were detected using qRT-PCR, which can

detect extremely low levels of transcript. Similar discrepancies in observed cellular patterns of expression have been observed in many other tissues (Lengner, Welstead, and Jaenisch 2008), and further work will be needed to clarify these discrepancies.

This study represents the first case where viral expression coupled with genetic cell lineage analysis was convincingly used to induce conversion of adult mammalian Müller glia to retinal neurons. Previous studies have reported that *Ascl1* overexpression can do this, but only in immature Müller glia (P11) (Pollak et al. 2013). One other study reported efficient conversion of Müller glia to photoreceptors using a complex cocktail of overexpressed factors, including *Ctnnb1*, *Otx2*, *Crx*, and *Nrl* (Yao et al. 2018), while another reported efficient conversion of Müller glia to retinal ganglion cells following overexpression of *Atoh7* and *Pou4f2* (Xiao et al. 2021). However, these studies both used GFAP minipromoters to both drive expression of these constructs and to infer cell lineage. Multiple studies have shown that GFAP minipromoter specificity is heavily influenced by insert sequences present in AAVs, which can result in both silencing of expression in glia and ectopic activation of expression in neurons (L.-L. Wang et al. 2021; Le et al. 2022). As a result, it cannot be concluded that these represent bona fide glia-to-neuron conversion *in vivo*. Similar claims have been made about knockdown of the RNA binding protein *Ptbp1*, which was variously claimed to directly convert Müller glia to either retinal ganglion cells or photoreceptors, but has been debunked using genetic cell lineage analysis (Hoang et al. 2022; Xie, Zhou, and Chen 2022). In this study, the combination of prospective cell lineage analysis using the *GlastCreER;Sun1-GFP* transgene before infection with GFAP-Oct4-mCherry vector, in combination with scRNA-Seq analysis of infected cells, rules out any potentially confounding factors resulting from the GFAP minipromoter.

Our finding that Oct4 can synergistically enhance neurogenesis induced by genetic disruption of Notch signaling raises the question of whether this might be more broadly applicable to other models of induced neurogenesis in mammalian Müller glia. The mechanism by which Oct4 induces glial-derived neurogenesis appears complex, and to differ fundamentally from that seen following either overexpression of *Ascl1* or loss of function of *Nfia/b/x* and/or *Rbpj* (Hoang et al. 2020; Le et al. 2024; Jorstad et al. 2017). In these cases, Müller glia broadly upregulate proneural genes and/or downregulate Notch signaling. Oct4 instead induces expression of the neurogenic transcription factor *Rfx4*, which is not expressed in developing retina. It is likely that activation of this parallel pathway to neurogenic competence in part accounts for synergistic induction of neurogenesis seen in *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia.

Other mechanisms enhancing Oct4-dependent neurogenesis in the *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia may include enhanced induction of *Klf4* expression and increased accessibility at target sites for neurogenic transcription factors such as Ascl1. While *Ascl1* overexpression induces Müller glia-derived neurogenesis in adult mice, this occurs only following treatment with HDAC inhibitors (Jorstad et al. 2017), even though Ascl1 is itself a pioneer factor (Păun et al. 2023). *Oct4* overexpression broadly increases the accessibility of putative cis-regulatory sequences associated with both *Neurog2* and *Insm1*, identifying another potential mechanism of synergy. Transient overexpression of Oct4 could potentially further enhance the neurogenic function of Ascl1, and enhance glial-derived neurogenesis more broadly. This may also be the case for

pathways reported to induce glial reprogramming in other CNS regions, such as *Sox2* overexpression (Niu et al. 2015). Since Oct4 overexpression does not induce detectable levels of proliferation, this reduces the potential oncogenic risk, and may ultimately prove to be relevant for the design of cell-based regenerative therapies for treating retinal dystrophies.

Methods:
Mice
Mice were raised and housed in a climate-controlled pathogen-free facility on a 14/10 h light/dark cycle. Mice used in this study were *GlastCreER;Sun1-GFP*, which were generated by crossing the *GlastCreER* and *Sun1-GFP* lines developed by Dr. Jeremy Nathans at Johns Hopkins (de Melo et al. 2012; Mo et al. 2015), and were obtained from his group. *GlastCreER;Rbpj$^{lox/lox}$;Sun1-GFP* mice were generated by crossing *GlastCreER;Sun1GFP* with conditional *Rbpj$^{lox/lox}$ mice* (JAX #034200).
GlastCreER;Notch1$^{lox/lox}$;Notch2$^{lox/lox}$;Sun1-GFP mice were obtained by crossing *GlastCreER;Notch1$^{lox/lox}$;Sun1-GFP* and *GlastCreER;Notch2$^{lox/lox}$;Sun1-GFP* mice. Maintenance and experimental procedures performed on mice were in accordance with the protocol approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Intraperitoneal tamoxifen (TAM) Injection
To induce *Cre* recombination, animals at ~3 weeks of age were intraperitoneally injected with tamoxifen (Sigma-Aldrich, #H6278-50mg) in corn oil (Sigma-Aldrich, #C8267-500ML) at 1.5mg/dose for five consecutive days.

NMDA treatment
Adult mice were anesthetized with isoflurane inhalation. Two microliters of 100 mM NMDA in PBS were intravitreally injected using a microsyringe with a 33G blunt-ended needle.

EdU treatment
At 1-week post tamoxifen induction, mice were administered EdU (Abcam, #ab146186) via i.p. injections (150µl of 5mg/ml in PBS) and drinking water (0.3 mg/ml) for 7 consecutive days.

Cloning, production, and intravitreal injection of Adeno-Associated Virus
The Addgene #50473 construct which contains a GFAP promoter was used in this study. The EGFP sequence was replaced by the mCherry sequence. The P2A ribosomal self-cleaving peptide is used to simultaneously express *Oct4* 5′ to the mCherry reporter as a single polypeptide, which is then cleaved to generate *Oct4* and mCherry. The coding sequence of *Oct4* was synthesized by GeneWiz. AAV constructs were packaged into AAV2.7m8 by Boston Children's Hospital Viral Core. Following tam induction, one-month-old GlastCreER;Sun1-GFP mice were intravitreally injected with GFAP AAV constructs using a microsyringe with a 33G blunt-ended needle. The titres and injection volume for each construct are listed in table ST6.

Immunohistochemistry and imaging

Collection and immunohistochemical analysis of retinas were performed as described previously (Hoang et al. 2020). Mouse eye globes were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde (ElectronMicroscopySciences, #15710) for 4 h at 4°C. Retinas were dissected in 1x PBS and incubated in 30% sucrose overnight at 4°C. Retinas were then embedded in OCT (VWR, #95057-838), cryosectioned at 16 μm thickness, and stored at −20°C. Sections were dried for 30 min in a 37°C incubator and washed 3 × 5 min with 0.1% TritonX-100 in PBS (PBST). EdU labeling was performed by using Click-iT EdU kit (ThermoFisher, #C10340, #C10636) following the manufacturer's instructions. Sections were then incubated in blocking buffer (10% Horse Serum (ThermoFisher, #26050070), 0.4% TritonX-100 in 1x PBS) for 2 h at room temperature (RT) and then incubated with primary antibodies in the blocking buffer overnight at 4°C. Primary antibodies used are listed in table ST7.

Sections were washed 4 x 5 min with PBST to remove excess primary antibodies and were incubated in secondary antibodies in blocking buffer for 2 h at RT. Sections were then counterstained with DAPI in PBST, washed 4 x 5 min in PBST and mounted with ProLong Gold Antifade Mountant (Invitrogen, #P36935) under coverslips (VWR, #,48404-453), air-dried, and stored at 4°C. Fluorescent images were captured using a Zeiss LSM 700 confocal microscope. Secondary antibodies used are listed in table ST6.

Cell quantification and statistical analysis

Otx2/GFP-positive and HuC/D/GFP-positive cells were counted and divided by the total number of GFP-positive cells from a single random whole section per retina. AAV infection efficiencies were calculated by the number of mCherry/GFP-positive cells divided by the total number of GFP-positive cells. Each data point in the bar graphs was calculated from an individual retina. All cell quantification data were graphed and analyzed using GraphPad Prism 10. Two-way ANOVA was used for analysis between 3 or more samples of multiple groups. All results are presented as mean ± SD.

Retinal cell dissociation

Retinas were dissected in fresh ice-cold PBS and retinal cells were dissociated using an optimized protocol as previously described (Fadl et al. 2020). Each sample contains a minimum of 4 retinas from 4 animals of both sexes. Dissociated cells were resuspended in ice-cold HBAG Buffer containing Hibernate A (BrainBits, #HALF500), B-27 supplement (ThermoFisher, #17504044), and Glutamax (ThermoFisher, #35050061).

Single-cell RNA-sequencing (scRNA-seq) library preparation

scRNA-seq were prepared on dissociated retinal cells using the 10X Genomics Chromium Single Cell 3' Reagents Kit v3.1 (10X Genomics, Pleasanton, CA). Libraries were constructed following the manufacturer's instructions and were sequenced using Illumina NextSeq. Sequencing data were processed through the Cell Ranger 7.0.1 pipeline (10X Genomics) using default parameters.

Single-cell Multiome ATAC + GEX sequencing library preparation

scATAC-seq and scRNA-seq were prepared on FACS-isolated GFP-positive cells using the 10X Genomic Chromium Next GEM Single Cell Multiome ATAC + Gene Expression kit following the manufacturer's instructions. Briefly, cells were spun down at 500xg for 5 min, resuspended in 100 µl of ice-cold 0.1x Lysis Buffer, lysed by pipette-mixing 4 times, and incubated on ice for 4 min total. Cells were washed with 0.5 ml of ice-cold Wash Buffer and spun down at 500xg for 5 min at 4°C. Nuclei pellets were resuspended in 10-15 µl Nuclei Buffer and counted using Trypan blue. Resuspended cell nuclei (10-15k) were utilized for transposition and loaded into the 10x Genomics Chromium Single Cell system. ATAC libraries were amplified with 10 PCR cycles and were sequenced on Illumina NovaSeq with ~200 million reads per library. RNA libraries were amplified from cDNA with 14 PCR cycles and were sequenced on Illumina NovaSeq 6000

scRNA-seq data analysis
ScRNA-Seq data were pre-processed using Cellranger v7.1.0 using custom mouse genome mm10 with mCherry and Sun1GFP sequences. The cell-by-genes count matrices were further analyzed using Seurat V5.1.0 (Hao et al. 2024).Cells with RNA counts less than 1000 or greater than 25,000, and number of genes less than 500 or greater than 6000 were filtered out as low-quality cells. Additionally, cells with a mitochondrial fraction of greater than 10% were removed. For data visualization, UMAP was generated using the first 20 dimensions. MG and MGPC cell clusters were subsetted for further analysis. Differential gene expression of mCherry control and Oct4-mCherry groups was performed using "FindAllMarkers" function.

Single-cell Multiomic analysis
For the data processing, raw scRNA-seq and scATAC-seq data were processed with the Cell Ranger software version 2.0.2 specifically using cellranger-arc pipeline for formatting reads, demultiplexing samples, genomic alignment, and generating the cell-by-gene count matrix and the fragments files. Both the cell-by-gene count matrix and the fragments files are the final output from the cellranger-arc pipeline and were used for all downstream analysis.

For the data analysis, scRNA-seq and scATAC-seq were analyzed using Archr version 1.0.2. EnsDb.Mmusculus.v79 and BSgenome.Mmusculus.UCSC.mm10 were used for annotations. The arrow file for each sample was created using the cell-by-gene count matrix and the fragments files output from the cellranger-arc pipeline. To filter poor quality cells, Gex_nGenes greater than 500 and less than 5000 were kept, Gex_nUMI greater than 1000 and less than 15,000 were kept. Also, TSSEnrichment greater than 10 and nFrags greater than 5000 were kept, other cells were deemed of poor quality and were filtered out. Gene expression values from a paired scATAC-seq and scRNA-seq multi modal assay were added to the arrow files using "addGeneExpressionMatrix" function. The LSI dimensionality reduction for both scATAC and scRNASeq was computed and combined using the "addCombinedDims" function. UMAP embedding is calculated using "addUMAP" function and clusters are identified from the reduced dimensions. Marker features were used to annotate clusters.

To get peaks, "addReproduciblePeakSet" function was used to get insertions from coverage files, call peaks, and merge peaks and this step internally used macs software. Then the "addPeakMatrix" function was called to independently compute counts for each peak per cell.

To link peaks to genes, "getPeak2GeneLinks" function was called. The "getMarkerFeatures" function was used to get the differential gene expressions and the differential peaks expressions using the GeneExpressionMatrix and PeakMatrix calculated respectively. Peaks with motifs were annotated using the cisbp motif set using "annotatePeaks.pl" from HOMMER version 4.11 to associate the peaks with nearby genes. Full code used for the analysis is available at https://github.com/SherineAwad/OCT4scRNA-ATAC

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Author contributions: N.L. collected and analyzed the bulk of all data presented here. S.A. analyzed single-cell multiomic data, and I.P. assisted in multiomic data. T.H. initiated the study and collected pilot data. S.B. supervised, coordinated, and directed this work. N.L., T.H., and S.B. drafted the manuscript, which all authors edited.

Declaration of interests: S.B. is a co-founder and shareholder of CDI Labs, LLC, and receives support from Genentech.

Data and materials availability: All scRNA-seq, snRNA-seq, and scATAC-seq data described in this study are available at Gene Expression Omnibus under accession number GSE277390.

Figure legends:
Figure 1: AAV-mediated overexpression of *Oct4* induces neurogenesis in injured wild-type mouse Müller glia. (A) Schematic of the transgenic construct used to specifically label MG with Sun1-GFP expression. **(B)** Schematic of the GFAP AAV constructs and experimental workflow. **(C)** Representative images of retinas immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, Otx2, and HuC/D. White arrowheads indicate GFP-positive MG-derived neurons expressing neuronal markers Otx2 or HuC/D. **(D)** Quantification of mean percentage ± SD of GFP-positive Müller glia-derived neurons expressing either Otx2 or HuC/D. TAM, tamoxifen; ONL, outer nuclear layer; INL, inner nuclear layer; GCL, ganglion cell layer. Scale bar = 50µm.

Figure 2: *Oct4* overexpression enhances neurogenesis in MG-specific *Rbpj* knockout. (A) Schematic of the transgenic constructs used to induce loss of function of *Rbpj* specifically in Müller glia. **(B)** Schematic of the GFAP AAV constructs and experimental workflow. **(C)** Representative images of retinas immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, Otx2, and HuC/D. White arrowheads indicate GFP-positive MG-derived neurons expressing neuronal markers Otx2 or HuC/D. **(D)** Quantification of mean percentage ± SD of GFP-positive Müller glia-derived neurons expressing either Otx2 or HuC/D. TAM, tamoxifen; ONL, outer nuclear layer; INL, inner nuclear layer; GCL, ganglion cell layer. Scale bar = 50µm.

Figure 3: ScRNA-Seq analysis of MG and MG-derived neurons from Rbpj conditional knockout with Oct4 overexpression. **(A)** Schematic of the scRNA-seq experimental pipeline. **(B)** UMAP plot showing the clustering of GFP-positive cells from retinas infected with GFAP-mCherry and GFAP-Oct4-mCherry AAV constructs. **(C)** Stacked bar plots showing the proportion of cells in each cluster across two sample groups. **(D)** Feature plots highlighting the cluster of Müller glia (*Hes5*), neurogenic MGPCs (*Neurog2, Insm1, Ascl1*), bipolar cells (*Otx2*), and amacrine cells (*Elavl3*). **(E)** Heatmap showing the expression of top differentially expressed genes (DEGs) for *Rbpj*-deficient MG cell cluster from retinas infected with GFAP-mCherry and GFAP-Oct4-mCherry AAV constructs. **(F)** Heatmap showing the expression of top differentially expressed genes (DEGs) for MGPC cell cluster from retinas infected with GFAP-mCherry and GFAP-Oct4-mCherry AAV constructs.

Figure 4: Integrated snRNA/scATAC-Seq analysis of control *and Rbpj*-deficient adult Müller glia with Oct4 overexpression. (A) Schematic of the multiomic scRNA/ATAC-seq experimental pipeline. **(B)** UMAP plot of multiomic datasets showing the clustering of GFP+ cells from control and *Rbpj*-deficient MG from GFAP-mCherry and GFAP-Oct4-mCherry AAV infected retinas. **(C)** UMAP plot showing the identity of cell clusters determined by marker gene expression. **(D)** Stacked bar plots represent the proportion of cells in each cluster across different sample groups. **(E)** Feature plots highlighting the cluster of Müller glia (*Hes1*), neurogenic MGPCs (*Neurog2, Sox4*), bipolar cells (*Otx2*), *Pou5f1*- and *Rfx4*-expressing cells. **(F)** Heatmap showing expression of DEGs along the neurogenesis trajectory. (**G**) Heatmap showing differential motif activity along the neurogenesis trajectory. (**H**) Heatmaps of DEGs between Oct4 and mCherry control in the wild-type and Rbpj-deficient MG cell clusters. Venn diagram showing unique and common DEGs between Oct4 and mCherry control in the wild-type and Rbpj-deficient MG clusters. (**I)** Increased chromatin accessibility regions associated

with Oct4 and Rfx4 loci by Oct4 overexpression in both wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia. (**J**) Top-ranked enriched motifs in increased accessibility chromatin regions induced by Oct4 overexpression in wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia cell clusters.

Figure S1: *Oct4/pou5f3* transcript is not detectably expressed in Müller glia after injury. Expression of pluripotency factors in resting or injured zebrafish (**a**) and mouse retina (**b**) after retinal injury from Hoang, et al. 2020 study and in *Nfia/b/x/Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia (**c**) from Le, et al. 2024.

Figure S2: Immunohistochemical analysis of glial, AAV reporter, and additional molecular markers of MG-derived neurons following *Oct4* transduction in WT and *Rbpj*-deficient MG. (**a**-**h**) Representative images of wildtype retina immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, and (**a**) Oct4, (**b**) Ascl1, (**c**) Sox2, (**d**) Scgn, (**e**) Cabp5, (**f**) Isl1, (**g**) Nrl, (**h**) EdU. (**i**-**k**) Representative images of Rbpj cKO retina immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, and (**i**) Oct4, (**j**) Sox9, (**k**) EdU. ONL, outer nuclear layer; INL, inner nuclear layer; GCL, ganglion cell layer. Scale bar = 50µm.

Figure S3: AAV-mediated overexpression of *Oct4* induces neurogenesis in injured *Notch1/2*-deficient mouse Müller glia. (**a**) Schematic of the transgenic mice used to induce deletion of *Notch1/2* specifically in Müller glia. (**b**) Schematic of the experimental workflow. (**c**) Representative images of retinas immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, Otx2, and HuC/D. White arrowheads indicate GFP-positive Müller glia -derived neurons expressing neuronal markers Otx2 or HuC/D. Quantification of mean percentage ± SD of GFP-positive Müller glia-derived neurons expressing either Otx2 or HuC/D. TAM, tamoxifen; ONL, outer nuclear layer; INL, inner nuclear layer; GCL, ganglion cell layer. Scale bar = 50µm.

Figure S4: *Oct4* overexpression does not enhance neurogenesis in *Nfia/b/x*-deficient Müller glia because the viral GFAP minipromoter is not active in Müller glia. (**a**) Schematic of the transgenic mice used to induce deletion of *Nfia/b/x* specifically in Müller glia. (**b**) Schematic of the experimental workflow. (**c**) Representative images of retinas immunolabeled for GFP, mCherry, Otx2, and HuC/D. White arrowheads indicate mCherry expression in Sox2+ Muller glia that are not Sun1-GFP+. Quantification of mean percentage ± SD of GFP-positive Müller glia-derived neurons expressing either Otx2 or HuC/D. TAM, tamoxifen; ONL, outer nuclear layer; INL, inner nuclear layer; GCL, ganglion cell layer. Scale bar = 50µm.

Figure S5: ScRNA-Seq analysis of Müller glia-derived neurons from Rbpj-deficient Müller glia following Oct4 overexpression. (**a**) UMAP plot showing GFP-positive cells from retinas infected with GFAP-mCherry and GFAP-Oct4-mCherry AAVs. (**b**) Expression of glial and neuronal markers. (**c**) Top DEGs of different cell types generated by Oct4 overexpression in *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia.

Figure S6: Pseudotime analysis showing the transition from resting to neurogenic MGPCs to bipolar cells. (**a**) Top DEGs across different retinal cell types. (**b**) Pseudotime

trajectory of neurogenesis from Müller glia to bipolar cells. (**c**) Heatmap showing differential chromatin accessible regions along the neurogenesis trajectory.

Table ST1: ScRNA-Seq analysis of Sun1-GFP Müller glia-derived cells identifies genes differentially regulated by Oct4 overexpression.

Table ST2: Multiomic analysis identifies differentially expressed genes, differential chromatin accessible regions and motif activity along the Müller glia-Bipolar cell neurogenesis trajectory

Table ST3: SnRNA-Seq analysis identifies DEGs induced by Oct4 overexpression in the Müller glia cell clusters from wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia.

Table ST4: SnATAC-Seq analysis identifies differentially accessible chromatin regions regulated by Oct4 overexpression in the Müller glia cell clusters from wildtype and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia.

Table ST5: SnATAC-Seq analysis identifies differential motif activity in increased accessible chromatin regions by Oct4 overexpression in the Müller glia cell clusters from wild-type and *Rbpj*-deficient Müller glia.

Table ST6: List of AAV constructs used in the study. Columns identify the AAV construct, titre, and injection volume.

Table ST7: List of antibodies used in the study. Columns identify the antibody, source, catalog number, and RRID identifier.

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Le *et al.*, Fig. 1

Le *et al.*, Fig. 2

Le *et al.*, Fig. 4

a

mCherry ctrl

GFP+mCherry | Oct4 | GFP+Oct4
ONL
INL
GCL

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Oct4 | GFP+Oct4
ONL
INL
GCL

b

mCherry ctrl

GFP+mCherry | Ascl1 | GFP+Ascl1
ONL
INL
GCL

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Ascl1 | GFP+Ascl1
ONL
INL
GCL

c

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Sox2 | GFP+Sox2
ONL
INL
GCL

d

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Scgn | GFP+Scgn
ONL
INL
GCL

e

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | CaBP5 | GFP+CaBP5
ONL
INL
GCL

f

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Isl1 | GFP+Isl1
ONL
INL
GCL

g

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Nrl | GFP+Nrl
ONL
INL
GCL

h

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | EdU | GFP+EdU
ONL
INL
GCL

Rbpj cKO

i

mCherry ctrl

GFP+mCherry | Oct4 | GFP+Oct4
ONL
INL
GCL

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Oct4 | GFP+Oct4
ONL
INL
GCL

j

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | Sox9 | GFP+Sox9
ONL
INL
GCL

k

Oct4-mCherry

GFP+mCherry | EdU | GFP+EdU
ONL
INL
GCL

Le *et al.*, Fig. S2

Le *et al.*, Fig. S3

a

b

birth (-3wks)	TAM	AAV	NMDA	Collect
	day -18-14	day -7	day 0	wk 5

c

Le *et al.*, Fig. S4

Le *et al.*, Fig. S5

Le *et al.*, Fig. S6