

## De Novo Protein Synthesis Mediated by the Eukaryotic Elongation Factor 2 Is Required for the Anxiolytic Effect of Oxytocin

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### ABSTRACT

**BACKGROUND:** The neuropeptide oxytocin (OXT) mediates its actions, including anxiolysis, via its G protein-coupled OXT receptor. Within the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus (PVN), OXT-induced anxiolysis is mediated, at least in part, via activation of the mitogen-activated protein kinase pathway following calcium influx through transient receptor potential cation channel subfamily V member 2 channels. In the periphery, OXT activates eukaryotic elongation factor 2 (eEF2), an essential mediator of protein synthesis.

**METHODS:** In order to study whether OXT activates eEF2 also in neurons to exert its anxiolytic properties in the PVN, we performed *in vivo* and cell culture experiments.

**RESULTS:** We demonstrate that OXT, in a protein kinase C-dependent manner, activates eEF2 both in a hypothalamic cell line and *in vivo* within the PVN. Next, we reveal that OXT stimulates *de novo* protein synthesis, while inhibition of protein synthesis within the PVN prevents the anxiolytic effect of OXT in male rats. Moreover, activation of eEF2 within the PVN conveyed an anxiolytic effect supporting a role of OXT-induced eEF2 activation and protein synthesis for its anxiolysis. Finally, we show that one of the proteins that is upregulated by OXT is the neuropeptide Y receptor 5. Infusion of a specific neuropeptide Y receptor 5 agonist into the PVN consequently led to decreased anxiety-related behavior, while pretreatment with a neuropeptide Y receptor 5 antagonist prevented the anxiolytic effect of OXT.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Taken together, these results show that OXT recruits several intracellular signaling cascades to induce protein synthesis, which mediates the anxiolytic effects of OXT within the PVN and suggests that eEF2 represents a novel target for anxiety-related disorders.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, De novo protein synthesis, eEF2, NPY5R, Oxytocin, PVN

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The neuropeptide oxytocin (OXT) is currently discussed as a treatment option for a series of psychiatric disorders owing to its prosocial, stress-attenuating, and anxiolytic properties (1–3). OXT, when infused into the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus (PVN), reduces anxiety- and fear-related behaviors in both rats and mice (4–8). The neuronal connections underlying its anxiolytic and fear-attenuating actions within various brain regions have progressively been revealed (4,8–10). In parallel, knowledge of intraneuronal signaling pathways coupled to the OXT receptor (OXTR) that underlie anxiolysis is growing, but gaps remain in our understanding concerning the molecular mechanisms that causally link OXTR recruitment and anxiolysis (7). Therefore, in order to fully establish OXT as a potential treatment option, the complete pathways, their target genes, and their contribution to the acute or longer lasting anxiolytic effects of OXT need to be revealed.

The principle effect of OXT upon binding to its G protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) is generation of inositol-3-phosphate,

which triggers calcium ion ( $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ) release from intracellular stores (7,11). However, GPCRs can engage additional intracellular pathways that would be beyond their reach based on  $\text{G}\alpha$  and  $\text{G}\beta/\gamma$  subunit recruitment *per se*. A potential explanation is the formation of receptor heterodimers or transactivation of other receptors that are able to recruit additional pathways depending on the cell type-specific repertoire of the expressed GPCRs (12–16). Such flexibility would enable OXT to induce appropriate biochemical and behavioral responses to meet the demands imposed by the internal or external milieu.

To address the effectors underlying the anxiolytic properties of OXT, we have already partially elucidated the intracellular signaling coupled to activation of the OXTR in the PVN. For instance, OXTR activation leads to increased intracellular  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  levels through influx of extracellular  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  via transient receptor potential cation channel subfamily V member 2 (TRPV2) channels (17). This is a prerequisite for the activation of mitogen-activated protein kinase kinase 1 and 2 (MEK1/2) and the subsequent anxiolytic effect of OXT (5,18). OXT can also

act, although not in the context of anxiety, via neuronal TRPV1 (19).

In peripheral cells, OXT has been shown to engage additional intracellular signaling pathways. For example, in myometrial cells, the recruitment of eukaryotic elongation factor 2 (eEF2) in a protein kinase C (PKC)-dependent manner is necessary for uterine contractility and successful parturition (20). Dephosphorylation of eEF2, or inhibition of phosphorylation at threonine 56, is equivalent to eEF2 activation, whereas eEF2 is generally inactive in its phosphorylated form (p-eEF2). In neurons, eEF2 is a key factor controlling dendritic protein synthesis from local messenger RNA (mRNA) pools, which might be important for synaptic plasticity (21,22). However, it is presently not known whether OXTR activation promotes the activity of eEF2 and subsequent protein synthesis in neurons. As eEF2 activation depends on OXTR-coupled PKC in myometrial cells (7), this hypothesis seems likely. In addition to PKC, mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) can activate eEF2, as shown in cardiomyocytes (23,24). This finding is of particular interest, since we have shown that OXT exerts its anxiolytic activity through transactivation of the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) (5) and subsequent recruitment of MAPK (5,17,18). While the precise mechanisms underlying EGFR transactivation have not been fully elucidated, an involvement of  $Ca^{2+}$  and PKC has been repeatedly implicated (25). Moreover, PKC directly activates Raf-1 proto-oncogene, serine/threonine kinase, both in vitro and in vivo (26), and regulates Raf kinase inhibitory protein, leading to MAPK activation (27). Thus, it is possible that both TRPV2 channel opening and PKC activation are upstream of MAPK recruitment by OXT, and hence both play a role in the anxiolytic activity of OXT.

Here we reveal that OXT, via two distinct pathways, activates eEF2 and subsequent protein synthesis. In detail, 1) activation of the OXTR leads—via the  $G\alpha_q$  subunit of the G protein—to the activation of PKC. Additionally, 2) via  $G\beta/\gamma$  recruitment, OXT prompts the MAPK pathway to induce full eEF2 translational activity. Having shown that OXT stimulates protein synthesis, we performed a microarray to identify candidate targets for the OXT-mediated protein synthesis. While numerous genes within the rat PVN were regulated by intracerebroventricular (icv) OXT, we identified that neuropeptide Y (NPY) receptor 5 (NPY5R) expression was upregulated following OXT administration in vitro and in vivo, and that NPY5R activity is sufficient for anxiolysis in general and necessary for the anxiolytic effect of OXT in particular.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

### Animals and Surgical Procedures

Adult male Wistar rats (250–300 g) (Charles River Laboratories, Sulzfeld, Germany) or virgin female Wistar rats (for microarray analysis only) (Charles River Laboratories) were housed under standard laboratory conditions (12-hour light/dark cycle, 22°C–24°C, lights on at 6 AM, food and water ad libitum). All behavioral tests were performed in the light phase (8 AM to noon). The studies were conducted in accordance with the European Communities Council Directive (86/609/EEC) and approved by the government of Oberpfalz, Germany (AZ 54–2531.2–16/08). Surgical procedures were performed under isoflurane anesthesia, local

anesthesia, and sterile conditions, supplemented by analgesic (buprenorphine, 0.05 mg/kg; Bayer, Leverkusen, Germany) and antibiotic (enrofloxacin; Bayer) treatments. After surgery, animals were single housed and handled daily to habituate them to the respective infusion procedure.

For analysis of neuronal responses to icv OXT or local intervention within the PVN, rats were implanted with a guide cannula (21 gauge, 12-mm length) 2 mm above the right lateral ventricle or above the target brain region (PVN) as described previously (5,18,28).

### Animal Experimental Protocols

For signaling studies, animals received icv infusions of either vehicle (Veh) or 1 nmol/5  $\mu$ L OXT and were killed 10, 20, 30, 60, or 90 minutes later. Punches were taken from a brain slice of 2 mm (anterior/posterior bregma  $-1$  to  $-2$ ) with a tissue puncher (2-mm diameter). Proteins were extracted from PVN tissue and quantified by Western blot (Supplement 1).

To determine whether protein synthesis in general, and NPY5R synthesis in particular, is necessary for OXT to exert its anxiolytic effect, separate groups of rats received bilateral intra-PVN infusions of the protein synthesis inhibitor anisomycin (29), the NPY5R antagonist L152,804 (0.82 nmol/0.5  $\mu$ L in 0.1% dimethyl sulfoxide) (30), or the respective Veh 20 minutes prior to OXT or Veh infusion (0.01 nmol in Ringer's solution) (5,17). Thirty minutes after the last infusion, anxiety-related behavior was tested in the light/dark box (LDB) as previously described (17,18).

To reveal the specific involvement of eEF2 activation in the regulation of anxiety-related behavior, separate groups of rats received bilateral intra-PVN infusions of the eEF2 kinase inhibitor A484954 (0.005 nmol in 0.1% dimethyl sulfoxide; MilliporeSigma, Burlington, MA) (31) or Veh before testing in the LDB 10 minutes later.

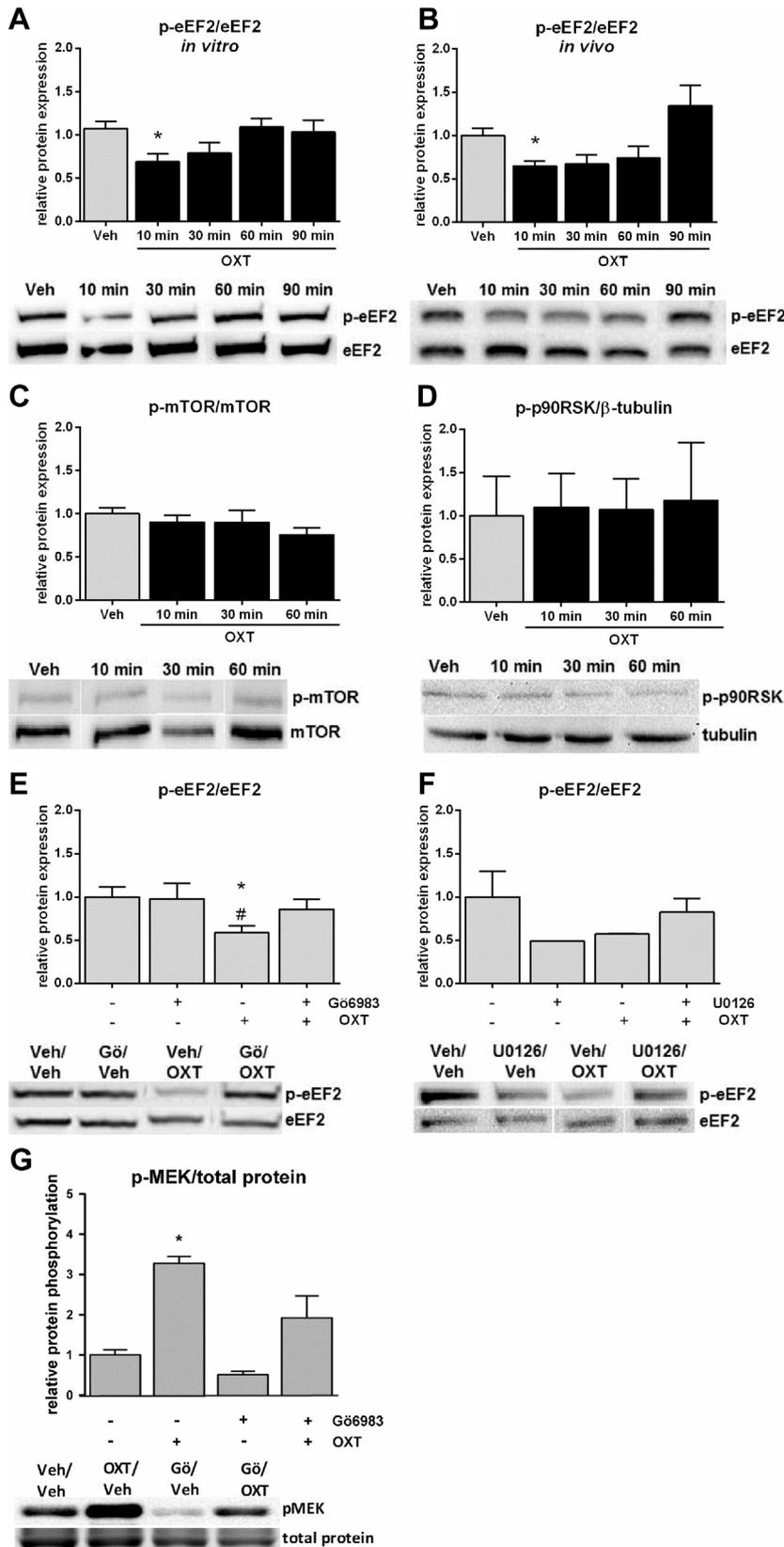
To reveal the effects of OXT on gene expression levels within the PVN (RNA microarray), separate groups of rats received an icv infusion of 1 nmol/5  $\mu$ L OXT or Veh, and they were killed 30 minutes later (see below and Supplement 1).

To assess whether NPY5R activation within the PVN modulates anxiety-related behavior, separate groups of rats received bilateral intra-PVN infusions of the NPY5R agonist [cPP]hPP (0.02 nmol in Ringer's solution; Bachem, Bubendorf, Switzerland) (32) or Veh and were tested in the LDB 10 minutes later.

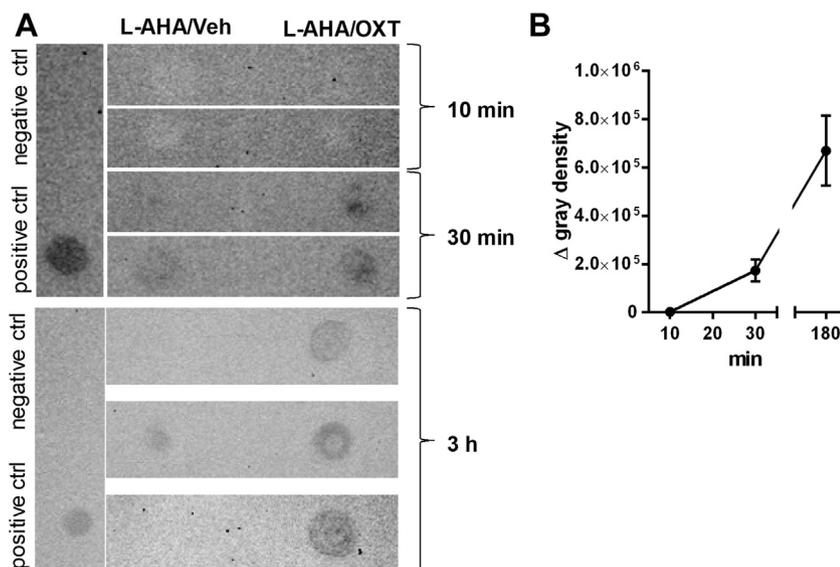
### Cell Culture and Experimental Protocols

Cell culture experiments were performed with either the rat hypothalamic cell line H32 (33) or primary hypothalamic neurons (34,35) (see Methods in Supplement 1). Isolation of de novo synthesized proteins was performed in primary hypothalamic neurons and H32 cells based on tagging and/or isolation of a synthetic Methionine-analogue according to Dieterich *et al.* (36) (see Methods in Supplement 1).

For analyses of signaling pathways in vitro, H32 cells were stimulated with Ringer's solution (Veh) or 200 nmol/L OXT (5,17,18) in Ringer's solution (MilliporeSigma) for 10, 20, 30, 60, and 90 minutes. In addition, cells were preincubated for 10 minutes with either 1  $\mu$ mol/L of the PKC inhibitor Gö6983, 10  $\mu$ mol/L of the MEK1/2 blocker U0126, or Veh (all in 0.1%



**Figure 1.** Eukaryotic elongation factor 2 (eEF2) is activated, i.e., dephosphorylated, by oxytocin (OXT) via the protein kinase C pathway. Time-dependent decrease of inactive eEF2 phosphorylated at threonine 56 (p-eEF2) (**A**) in hypothalamic cells (vehicle [Veh],  $n = 10$ ; 10 minutes,  $n = 5$ ; 30 minutes,  $n = 4$ ; 60 minutes,  $n = 4$ ; 90 minutes,  $n = 4$ ) and (**B**) within the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus of male rats (Veh,  $n = 26$ ; 10 minutes,  $n = 10$ ; 30 minutes,  $n = 4$ ; 60 minutes,  $n = 6$ ; 90 minutes,  $n = 5$ ) after OXT stimulation (in vitro: 250 nmol/L; intracerebroventricular: 1 nmol/5  $\mu$ L) compared with Veh treatment. (**C**) Levels of phosphorylated mammalian target of rapamycin (p-mTOR) or (**D**) phosphorylated p90 ribosomal s6 kinase (p-p90RSK) were not influenced by OXT. (**E**) Blockade of OXT-induced downregulation of p-eEF2 by preincubation of hypothalamic cells with Gö6983 (Gö), a protein kinase C inhibitor ( $n = 3$  or 4). (**F**) The mitogen-activated protein kinase 1 and 2 (MEK1/2) inhibitor U0126 reduced p-eEF2 levels and prevented OXT-induced reduction of p-eEF2 levels in H32 cells ( $n = 3$ ). (**G**) Blockade of OXT-induced MEK phosphorylation by preincubation of H32 cells with Gö6983 ( $n = 3$ ). Bars represent mean  $\pm$  SEM, \* $p < .05$  vs. Veh, # $p < .05$  vs. Gö6983/OXT.



**Figure 2.** Oxytocin (OXT) increases de novo protein synthesis in hypothalamic cells. The synthetic amino acid L-azidohomoalanine (L-AHA) gets incorporated into newly synthesized proteins and is detected via a click azide–alkyne reaction with biotin alkyne. **(A)** Dot blot analysis of separate labeling experiments in primary hypothalamic cells 10, 30, and 180 minutes after OXT stimulation (250 nmol/L;  $n = 2$  or 3). **(B)** Time-dependent increase of detectable newly synthesized proteins compared with vehicle (Veh)–treated cells. Line represents mean  $\pm$  SEM ( $n = 2$  or 3). ctrl, control.

dimethyl sulfoxide in Ringer’s solution), before 200 nmol/L OXT or Veh was applied. To assess the effects of eEF2 activation on NPY5R protein levels, H32 cells were stimulated with the eEF2 kinase inhibitor A484954 (MilliporeSigma) 10  $\mu$ mol/L or 50  $\mu$ mol/L for 3 hours with Veh as control. In all cases, proteins were isolated 10 minutes after the last stimulation and subjected to Western blot (see Methods and Table S1 in Supplement 1).

### Microarray and Complementary DNA Analysis

To identify genome-wide transcript expression changes within the PVN following OXT administration, rats received an icv infusion of either OXT or Veh, and PVN tissue was collected 30 minutes later for an Affymetrix microarray (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA) study (see Methods in Supplement 1). Subsequently, upregulation of *Npy5r* mRNA was confirmed by quantitative polymerase chain reaction quantification relative to the expression of glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (37); see Table S2 in Supplement 1 for primer sequences.

### Statistics

Behavioral and biochemical data were analyzed using either a Student’s *t* test, one-way analysis of variance followed by least significant difference post hoc test, or two-way analysis of variance (pretreatment; treatment) followed by least significant difference post hoc test using the software package SPSS (version 19.0; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Data represent mean and SEM; significance was accepted at  $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

### OXT Activates eEF2 Through PKC and MEK1/2

To determine whether OXT recruits eEF2, we assessed the level of eEF2 phosphorylated at threonine 56, both in cell culture and in the PVN. The p-eEF2 level was reduced in H32 cells 10 minutes following incubation with 200 nmol/L OXT

( $F_{4,27} = 3.104$ ,  $p = .036$ ), indicating activation, and the level returned to baseline after 30 to 60 minutes (Figure 1A). Similarly, icv infusion of OXT transiently reduced p-eEF2 levels in the PVN within 10 minutes ( $F_{4,51} = 4.336$ ,  $p = .005$ ), which reversed to baseline from 30 minutes onward (Figure 1B). Thus, OXT activates eEF2 both in a hypothalamic cell line and within the PVN.

eEF2 phosphorylation and dephosphorylation are controlled by multiple intracellular messengers. In order to determine which messengers are employed by OXT, we analyzed the recruitment of the most regularly reported ones, including PKC, since it has already been shown to activate eEF2 upon OXT stimulation in myometrial cells (20). We found that the mammalian target of rapamycin and p90 ribosomal s6 kinase were not activated by OXT in H32 cells, as evidenced by a lack of alteration of their phosphorylation level, arguing against a role in the control of p-eEF2 levels (Figure 1C, D). In contrast, blocking PKC activity with Gö6983 abolished the effect of OXT on MEK1/2 ( $F_{3,13} = 17.597$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Figure 1G) and eEF2 ( $F_{3,13} = 5.697$ ,  $p = .018$ ) phosphorylation in H32 cells (Figure 1E, F). This finding suggests a PKC-dependent signaling cascade that leads to the OXT-induced activation of MEK1/2 and subsequent dephosphorylation (or reduced phosphorylation) of eEF2. However, while the MEK1/2 blocker U0126 applied alone reduced p-eEF2 levels, it prevented OXT-induced eEF2 dephosphorylation ( $F_{3,13} = 7.937$ ,  $p = .037$ ) (Figure 1F). Together these findings suggest that eEF2 is under inhibitory control of MEK1/2 under basal conditions and that MEK1/2 activation by OXT removes this brake. This is consistent with earlier observations that OXT-induced MEK1/2 activation exerts actions that are quite different from those exerted by MEK1/2 that is active in the absence of OXT. The most striking example is the lack of phosphorylation of extracellular signal-regulated kinases 1 and 2 under OXT (18), despite this representing the most consistently characterized downstream consequence of MEK1/2 activation (38). Together, these results suggest that eEF2 is dephosphorylated

(or less phosphorylated) through direct coupling of OXTR activation to PKC and subsequent transactivation of the EGFR and MEK1/2 recruitment.

### OXT Promotes Protein Synthesis in Hypothalamic Cells

Given that eEF2 is an important regulator of protein synthesis, we next determined whether OXT administration leads to increased protein synthesis *in vitro*. By measuring the incorporation of the synthetic amino acid L-azidohomoalanine into newly synthesized proteins, we show that OXT increased protein synthesis within 30 minutes until at least 3 hours ( $p = .01$  for primary cells;  $p = .003$  for H32 cells) (Figure 2). Basal protein synthesis in Veh-treated H32 cells showed a slow increase of newly synthesized proteins over time, becoming detectable at the 3-hour time point, which reflects the phenomenon of permanent cell activity in immortalized cell lines (39). Thus, OXT does indeed stimulate protein synthesis in hypothalamic cells.

### OXT-Induced Protein Synthesis Is Involved in Anxiolysis

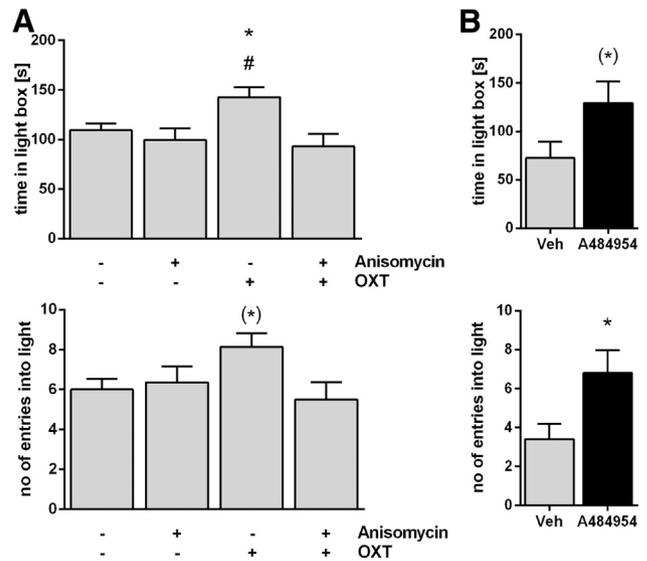
To assess whether de novo protein synthesis is involved in OXT-induced anxiolysis after 30 minutes, male rats were pre-treated with the protein synthesis inhibitor anisomycin, or Veh, and then tested in the LDB. We could confirm the established anxiolytic effect of intra-PVN OXT (5,18), as reflected by an increased time spent in the light chamber ( $F_{3,43} = 4.824$ ,  $p = .006$ ; Veh/OXT vs. Veh/Veh,  $p = .042$ ) (Figure 3A). Anisomycin alone did not affect behavior, but it did block the anxiolytic effect of OXT (Veh/OXT vs. anisomycin/OXT,  $p = .002$ ) (Figure 3A, B). Thus, the anxiolytic effect observed 30 minutes after intra-PVN OXT infusion requires active protein synthesis.

### Direct eEF2 Activation Within the PVN Is Anxiolytic

Next, we hypothesized that increased protein synthesis via eEF2 activation is anxiolytic, and we tested whether inhibition of eEF2 kinase, resulting in activation of eEF2, is sufficient to decrease anxiety. Bilateral infusion of the eEF2 kinase inhibitor A484954 into the PVN increased the number of entries into the light chamber and reduced the latency to re-enter the light chamber of the LDB ( $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, we found a tendency toward an increase in the time spent in the light chamber ( $p = .065$ ) (Figure 3B). Thus, stimulation of protein synthesis within the PVN, via activation of eEF2, is sufficient to reduce anxiety-like behavior.

### Determination of Gene Expression and Proteins Affected by Intra-PVN OXT Administration

In *icv* OXT-treated rats, we identified 157 upregulated and 204 downregulated known genes within the PVN (see Figure 4, Table 1, and Table S3 in Supplement 2 and the Gene Expression Omnibus DataSet). Among the upregulated genes, we focused on NPY5R, since the NPY system, especially those mechanisms involving NPY1R and NPY5R, has been implicated in the regulation of anxiety-like behavior (32,40). We confirmed, via quantitative polymerase chain reaction and Western blot analysis, that OXT increases both NPY5R gene expression and protein synthesis 30 minutes and 180 minutes

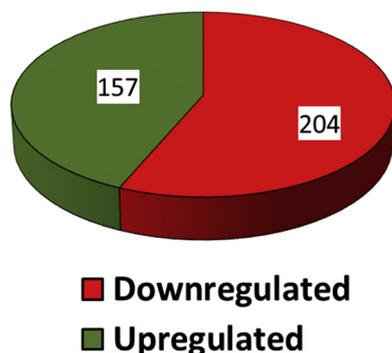


**Figure 3.** Local inhibition of protein synthesis by anisomycin abolishes the anxiolytic effect of oxytocin (OXT) within the paraventricular nucleus, while activation of eukaryotic elongation factor 2 (and protein synthesis) decreases anxiety-related behavior in the light/dark box. **(A)** Intra-paraventricular nucleus infusion of the protein synthesis inhibitor anisomycin (23.5  $\mu\text{mol}/0.5 \mu\text{L}$ ) prior to OXT infusion (0.01  $\text{nmol}/0.5 \mu\text{L}$ ) abolishes the anxiolytic effect of OXT ( $-/-$ ,  $n = 8$ ;  $+/-$ ,  $n = 11$ ;  $-/+$ ,  $n = 14$ ;  $+/+$ ,  $n = 10$ ) indicated by a significant increase in time spent in the light box but no difference to basal levels in the presence of anisomycin. **(B)** Intra-paraventricular nucleus infusion of the eukaryotic elongation factor 2 kinase inhibitor A484954 (0.005  $\text{nmol}/0.5 \mu\text{L}$ ) decreases anxiety-related behavior as reflected by increased time spent in the light and more entries performed into the light box ( $n = 7-9$ ). Bars represent mean  $\pm$  SEM, \* $p < .05$  vs. vehicle (Veh), # $p < .05$  vs. anisomycin/OXT, (\* $p \leq .065$ , no, number.

after intra-PVN OXT infusion in male rats ( $p < .05$ ) (Figure 5A). To assess whether direct eEF2 activation would mimic the OXT-induced increase in NPY5R protein levels, H32 cells were treated with the eEF2 kinase inhibitor A484954 for 3 hours. A484954 dose-dependently increased NPY5R protein levels, thereby showing a similar effect on NPY5R expression as OXT ( $F_{2,15} = 13.706$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Veh vs. 10  $\mu\text{mol}/\text{L}$ ,  $p = .007$ ; Veh vs. 50  $\mu\text{mol}/\text{L}$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Figure 6A).

### NPY5R Activity Within the PVN Is Anxiolytic and Required for the Anxiolytic Effect of OXT

To assess whether NPY5R plays a role in anxiety-related behavior within the PVN, we bilaterally infused the specific NPY5R agonist [cPP]hPP into the PVN 10 minutes before testing rats in the LDB. Local [cPP]hPP increased the time spent in the light chamber of the LDB ( $p = .007$ ) (Figure 5B) without changing locomotor activity. Next, we asked whether NPY5R is involved in OXT-induced anxiolysis. Male rats were pretreated with the selective NPY5R antagonist L152,804 or Veh prior to local OXT infusion, and then they were tested in the LDB. We replicated the anxiolytic effect of OXT, as reflected by a strong trend toward increased time spent in the light chamber of the LDB; while L152,804 alone did not affect any behavioral parameter, it blocked the anxiolytic effect of OXT ( $F_{3,20} = 4.107$ ,  $p = .02$ ; Veh/Veh vs. Veh/OXT,  $p = .053$ ;



**Figure 4.** Oxytocin infusion leads to the upregulation of 157 known genes and the downregulation of 204 known genes as assessed using Affymetrix HGU133 Plus 2.0 arrays.

Veh/OXT vs. L152/OXT,  $p = .035$ ) (Figure 6B). These data reveal that OXT increases the synthesis of proteins, such as NPY5R, whose activity is sufficient for anxiolysis in general and necessary for the anxiolytic effect of OXT in particular.

## DISCUSSION

One of the well-established actions of centrally released OXT is anxiolysis; however, the underlying intracellular mechanisms remain poorly elucidated. In this study, we show that the anxiolytic effect of intra-PVN OXT, as witnessed 30 minutes after infusion, requires active protein synthesis. Furthermore, we have shown that OXT, through activation of PKC and MEK1/2, engages eEF2 to induce protein synthesis. A microarray assessment revealed a number of genes that are potentially regulated by OXT. Specifically, we validated the OXT-induced upregulation of NPY5R and revealed its anxiolytic properties within the PVN. These results support a novel role for eEF2, namely anxiety regulation within the hypothalamus.

Central to this study is the cascade of events coupled to OXTR activation and reduced eEF2 phosphorylation. Indeed, using specific pharmacological tools, we could identify several factors that are up- or downstream of eEF2 recruitment, resulting in protein synthesis and anxiolysis. Although the use of anisomycin to block protein synthesis may affect protein phosphorylation and thus seems rather unspecific, it did not affect anxiety-related behavior. Additionally, we have assessed the role of eEF2 and NPY5R in behavior with highly specific pharmacological modulators. Therefore, it appears that OXT-induced eEF2 activation with subsequent protein synthesis is required for the anxiolytic effect of OXT in the PVN.

In contrast to nonneural cell types (22,41–43), eEF2 is under the control of PKC, rather than mammalian target of rapamycin and p90 ribosomal s6 kinase, when recruited by OXTR. In support, this OXT-eEF2 pathway has been reported in myometrial cells (20). Since the PKC family of protein kinases comprises multiple subtypes, future studies are required to investigate the exact molecular identity of involved PKC isoforms.

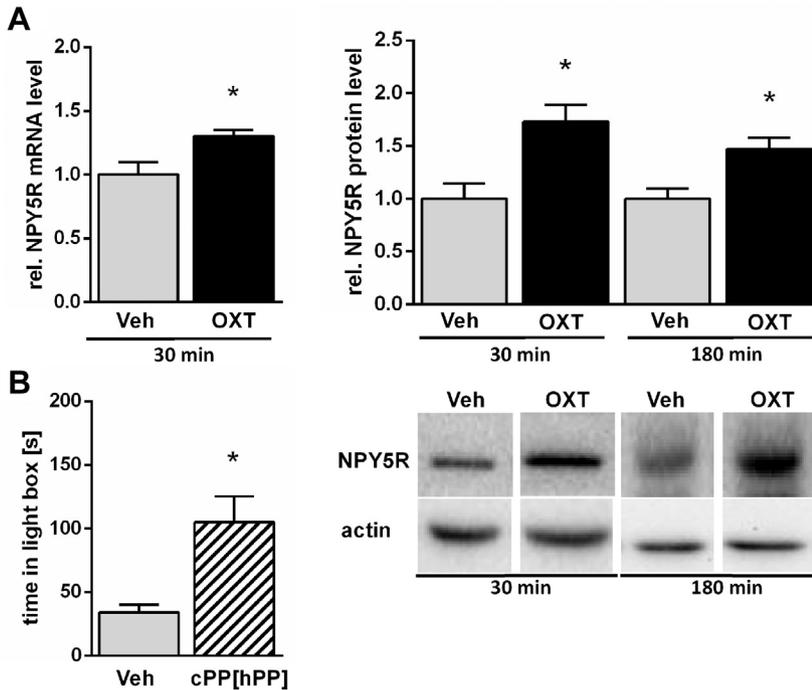
The identified OXTR-eEF2 signaling pathway adds to the complexity of OXTR-mediated intracellular effects. However, eEF2 may be a downstream effector of the TRPV2-MEK1/2

**Table 1. Excerpt of Genes Significantly Upregulated or Downregulated Within the Rat Paraventricular Nucleus of the Hypothalamus 30 Minutes After Intracerebroventricular Infusion of Oxytocin**

Biological Process	Upregulated Genes	Downregulated Genes
Synaptic Activity/ Plasticity	<i>Grm4</i> <i>Gabra5</i> <i>Dpys14</i> <i>Rxr</i>	<i>Gria3</i> , <i>Gria4</i> <i>Gabrg3</i> <i>Glrb</i> <i>Smcx</i> <i>Mecp2</i>
Neuronal Excitability	<i>Kcnc3</i> <i>Prkcd</i> <i>Kcnk4</i> <i>Kcnj11</i>	<i>Kcnc1/Kcncq1</i> <i>Kcnab1</i> <i>Kcnp4</i> <i>Dlg2</i> <i>Snx27</i>
Neuropeptides	<i>Hcrt</i> <i>Npy</i> , <i>Npy5r</i> <i>Adcyap1</i> <i>Ghrh</i> Rfamide related peptide	<i>Crf</i> <i>Oxt</i> <i>Avp</i>
Cell Adhesion	<i>Necl-1</i> <i>Pard3</i> <i>Amigo2</i> <i>Adamts1</i> <i>Efemp2</i>	<i>Ncam</i> <i>Nrxn3</i> <i>Pcdh9</i> and <i>Pcdha13</i> <i>Cdh6</i> and <i>Cdh11</i> <i>Negr1</i> <i>Obcam</i> <i>Cntn3</i> <i>Caspr</i> <i>Adgra3</i> <i>Itgb6</i> <i>Flrt3</i> <i>Dcc</i>

Assessment of the regulated genes identified a number of potential target genes involved in biological processes known to be regulated by oxytocin (for the full list of altered genes see Table S3 in Supplement 2).

cascade previously described to be necessary for OXT-induced anxiolysis (17). Our data further suggest that PKC and MEK1/2 are part of the same cascade, considering that both prevent the OXT-induced reduction of p-eEF2 levels to a similar extent. This finding is consistent with the generally accepted notion that PKC is a mediator of EGFR transactivation (25,44). Therefore, we propose a two-tiered intracellular signaling cascade that is coupled to the OXTR and brings about anxiolysis. The first tier depends on activation of the  $G\alpha_q$  protein subunit and involves PKC, while the second tier requires the activity of the  $G\beta/\gamma$  protein subunit, which promotes extracellular  $Ca^{2+}$  influx through TRPV2 channels that is necessary for EGFR transactivation. Thus, the combined actions of the different G protein subunits seem necessary for anxiolysis through transactivation of the EGFR and subsequent recruitment of downstream intracellular effectors (Figure 7). This conceptual model is in line with the demonstration of eEF2 activation by other GPCRs in myocytes. For example, stimulation of adrenergic (24) and angiotensin (23) receptors also leads to MEK1/2 phosphorylation and subsequent dephosphorylation of eEF2 kinase, the principal inhibitor of eEF2 (45). On the other hand, application of the MEK1/2 inhibitor U0126 in the absence of OXT promoted eEF2 dephosphorylation. This finding indicates an inhibitory action of MEK1/2 on eEF2 dephosphorylation. Alternatively, this finding could indicate a stimulatory action of eEF2

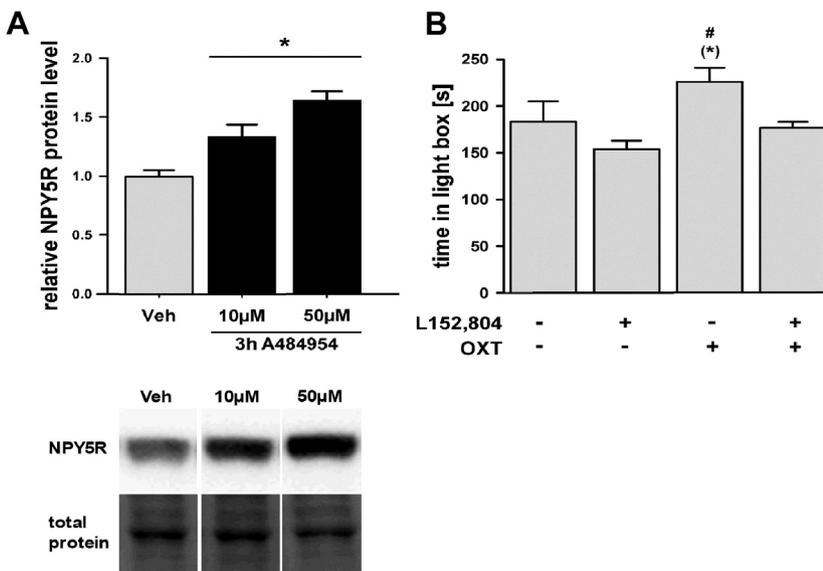


**Figure 5.** (A) Intracerebroventricular oxytocin (OXT) increases relative (rel.) messenger RNA (mRNA) and protein expression of neuropeptide Y receptor 5 (NPY5R) in the paraventricular nucleus of male rats 30 minutes and 180 minutes after infusion;  $*p < .05$ ,  $n = 3-7$ . (B) Activation of NPY5R within the paraventricular nucleus via local infusion of the NPY5R agonist [cPP]hPP decreases anxiety-related behavior in the light/dark box 10 minutes after infusion. Bars represent mean + SEM.  $*p < .05$ ,  $n = 6$ . Veh, vehicle.

phosphorylation under basal conditions. This effect of MEK1/2 signaling has not received much attention, as MEK1/2 is generally considered to be a mitogenic agent, mainly involved in proliferation and cell survival (38) but also in the onset and progression of many types of cancer (46). However, the anti-proliferative effects of some drugs (sulforaphane, pioglitazone) have been associated with upregulated MEK1/2 phosphorylation (47,48), suggesting that MEK1/2 negatively affects

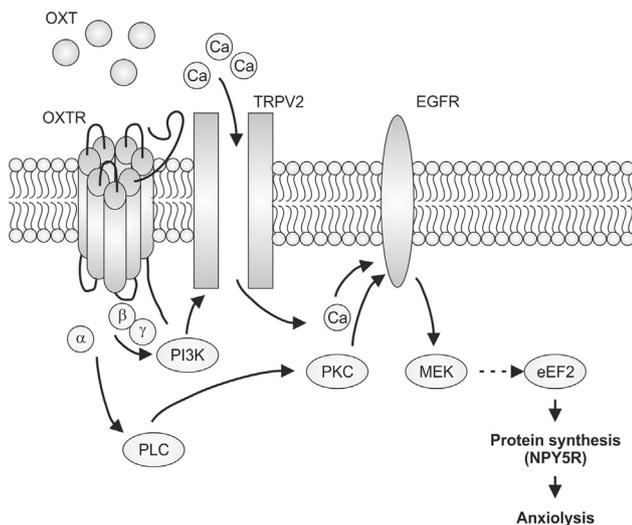
mitogenic intracellular signaling pathways that would require protein synthesis for cell proliferation. The precise mechanisms underlying these effects of MEK1/2 have not been elucidated to date, but they warrant further investigation.

The observed onset of eEF2 dephosphorylation within 10 minutes is in accordance with the time frame for the activation of both PKC and MEK1/2 (5,49). In dendrites, protein synthesis can occur within 3 minutes following stimulation of



**Figure 6.** Activation of eukaryotic elongation factor 2 increases neuropeptide Y receptor 5 (NPY5R) levels in vitro, while preadministration of an NPY5R antagonist abolishes the anxiolytic effect of oxytocin (OXT) in vivo within the paraventricular nucleus. (A) The eukaryotic elongation factor 2 kinase inhibitor A484954 (10 μmol/L [μM], 30 μmol/L) increased NPY5R protein levels in the hypothalamic cell line H32 in a dose-dependent manner (vehicle [Veh],  $n = 7$ ; 10 μM,  $n = 7$ ; 50 μM,  $n = 4$ ). (B) Intracerebroventricular nucleus infusion of the NPY5R antagonist L152,804 (0.82 nmol/0.5 μL) prior to OXT (0.01 nmol/0.5 μL) abolished the anxiolytic effect of OXT (-/-,  $n = 8$ ; +/-,  $n = 6$ ; -/+,  $n = 5$ ; +/+,  $n = 6$ ), indicated by an increased time spent in the light box. Bars represent mean + SEM.  $*p < .05$  vs. Veh,  $^{\#}p = .053$  vs. Veh,  $^{\#}p < .05$  vs. L152,804/OXT and vs. L152,804/Veh.

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**Figure 7.** Schematic representation of the proposed two-tiered intracellular signaling cascade leading to oxytocin (OXT)-induced anxiolysis. Upon binding to its receptor, OXT leads to the activation of protein kinase C (PKC) via the  $G_{\alpha_q}$  protein subunit, which subsequently transactivates the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) (5). Secondly, via the  $G_{\beta/\gamma}$  protein subunit, OXT promotes extracellular calcium ion (Ca) influx through transient receptor potential cation channel subfamily V member 2 (TRPV2) channels (17), which is necessary for EGFR transactivation and mitogen-activated protein kinase pathway activation (35). The combined actions of the different G protein subunits seem thus necessary for anxiolysis via convergence on eukaryotic elongation factor 2 (eEF2) and the resultant stimulation of protein synthesis. The dashed line from mitogen-activated protein kinase kinase (MEK) to eEF2 represents uncertainty concerning the mechanism by which MEK1/2 inhibits eEF2 phosphorylation. NPY5R, neuropeptide Y receptor 5; OXTR, OXT receptor; PI3K, phosphatidylinositol-3 kinase; PLC, phospholipase C.

*N*-methyl-D-aspartate receptors (50,51), which is important for synaptic plasticity and learning throughout the brain (52). This also applies to fear learning in the lateral amygdala, where both long-term potentiation and memory consolidation depend on protein synthesis (53). Importantly, eEF2 has been shown to induce rapid effects on translational regulation (54).

Similar to the effects of the de novo synthesized proteins on stabilizing potentiated synapses, the proteins formed following OXTR binding and eEF2 activation might consolidate the anxiolytic phenotype of OXT activity. In support, a longer-term (4-hour) anxiolytic effect of a single endogenous OXT surge in the PVN following successful mating has been observed (55). As a proof of principle to determine whether OXT induces the production of proteins with anxiolytic activity, we studied NPY5R expression, since NPY5R agonists have anxiolytic properties (56). *Npy5r* mRNA was markedly upregulated by OXT as measured by microarray and quantitative polymerase chain reaction. In confirmation, NPY5R protein levels were more abundant 30 minutes following OXT treatment. Thus, OXT may promote the translation of the already existing *Npy5r* mRNA pool and may increase this pool even further during prolonged exposure. Moreover, the specific eEF2 kinase inhibitor A484954 also increased NPY5R protein levels, supporting its role in the observed effects of OXT.

Our observation that intra-PVN NPY5R activation, by means of a specific agonist, induces anxiolysis demonstrates that OXT is able to promote the synthesis of proteins that exert anxiolytic activity for at least 4 hours. Furthermore, the anxiolytic effect of OXT was prevented by pretreatment with a specific NPY5R antagonist. This finding suggests that neuropeptides within the PVN act in concert to prevent anxiety-like behavior. Indeed, we recently found that neuropeptide S released from locus coeruleus axon terminals in the PVN induces local somatodendritic OXT release, demonstrating an additional interaction between OXT and other neuropeptides (57). Local OXT may expose many, if not all, PVN neurons to OXT. However, it is at present not clear which of these neurons, such as corticotropin-releasing factor, vasopressin, or OXT cells, express the OXTR or NPY5R. Thus, the cell type-specific responses of PVN neurons and their contribution to the regulation of anxiety-related behavior need to be addressed in future studies.

The anxiolytic activity of NPY5R in the PVN has not been described before, but such activity has been described in the amygdala (32,58). Thus, the present results further support the roles of NPY5R and the PVN in anxiety regulation. Further, binding of NPY to NPY1R or NPY5R on OXTergetic neurons in the PVN inhibits the secretion of anorexigenic neuropeptides (59). This finding, taken together with our findings, indicates complex interactions between the OXT and NPY system in the context of anxiety and feeding behaviors at the hypothalamic level.

In conclusion, we have shown that OXT exerts its anxiolytic activity in the PVN through protein synthesis, which is mediated through eEF2 activation. Importantly, two distinct GPCR-coupled signaling pathways converge to activate eEF2—i.e., 1) the G protein  $\alpha_q$  subunit and PKC activation (necessary for EGFR transactivation) and 2) the  $\beta/\gamma$  subunit—to promote extracellular  $Ca^{2+}$  influx and MEK1/2 activation. A role of eEF2 in anxiolysis was recently demonstrated in mice with a dysfunctional gamma-aminobutyric acid A receptor on somatostatin-positive neurons. These mice displayed decreased eEF2 phosphorylation in the hippocampus and medial prefrontal cortex and showed reduced levels of anxiety (60). Thus, it appears that eEF2 activation and subsequent protein synthesis are generally implicated in the control of anxiety-like behavior, including OXT-induced anxiolysis. Specifically, we can show that OXT stimulates NPY5R synthesis, with NPY5R activation exerting a clear anxiolytic effect and being necessary for the anxiolytic effect induced by OXT. Taken together, our study has identified novel effectors of OXT-induced anxiolysis in the PVN that lend themselves to further study of anxiety disorders and development of pharmacological therapies in the future.

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