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Longitudinal changes in gray matter correspond to changes in cognition across the lifespan: implications for theories of cognition

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the association between gray matter volume and cognition. Studies that have examined this issue have focused primarily on older adults, whereas the present study examines the issue across the entire adult lifespan. A total of 463 adults, ages 20–88 at first assessment, were followed longitudinally across three assessments over 8–10 years. Significant individual differences in a general cognition measure comprised of measures of speed of processing, working memory, and episodic memory were observed, as well as in measures of cortical and subcortical gray matter. Parallel process latent growth curve modeling showed a reliable relationship between decreases in cortical matter and cognitive decline across the entire adult lifespan, which persisted after controlling for age effects. Implications of these findings in relation to progression toward dementia, risk assessment, cognitive intervention, and environmental factors are discussed, as well as implications for theories of cognitive aging.

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1. Introduction

Cognitive decline in later life is an established fact of human aging, with a broad array of cognitive processes affected, including episodic memory, speed of processing, working memory, and reasoning (Park et al., 2002; Salthouse, 2016; Verhaeghen and Salthouse, 1997). Accompanying this decline is structural deterioration of the brain that includes shrinkage of cortical and subcortical gray matter (Raz et al., 2003, 2005, 2010), as well as cortical thinning (Fjell et al., 2014; Rast et al., 2018, and see Kennedy and Raz, 2015 for a review). Many studies have suggested directly or indirectly that the loss of gray matter appears to be an important mechanism underlying the decline of cognitive function in later life (Cox et al., 2019, 2021; Head et al., 2008; Nickl-Jockschat et al., 2012; Park and Reuter-Lorenz, 2009; Reuter-Lorenz and Park, 2014), and this coupling of changes in gray matter with changes in cognition (i.e., change-

change association) has been supported by several longitudinal studies assessing change-change associations in brain structure and cognitive performance. For example, Fletcher et al. (2018) found via latent variable modeling that change over 2 years in general cognition was strongly associated with longitudinal change in whole-brain gray matter volume in a cohort of 454 older adults. Hunt et al. (2021) found that change in cortical thickness mediated the association between a measure of socio-economic status and change in a range of cognitive assessments in a sample of 601 older adults. Similarly, Vonk et al. (2022) identified a strong relationship between global brain atrophy (gray and white matter) and longitudinal decline in general cognitive ability in a sample of 989 middle-aged and older adults, although notably this association was stronger in later life.

As the above-summarized studies demonstrate, global measures of brain atrophy are strongly related to measures of general cognition in older adults. However, while this relationship is most pronounced—and more consequential—in later life, volumetric gray matter loss and cognitive decline are expressed to a lesser degree in middle- and even early adulthood (Bethlehem et al., 2022; Fjell et al.,

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2021; Salthouse, 2016; Walhovd et al., 2017). Studies of older adults have consistently reported age differences in the association between gray matter volume and cognitive performance at baseline assessment (Fletcher et al., 2018; Head et al., 2008; Hunt et al., 2021; Nickl-Jockschat et al., 2012; Raz et al., 2008; Vonk et al., 2022). To fully understand human development of brain and cognition, it is necessary to also study how loss of cortical volume influences cognitive trajectories in middle—and potentially early—adulthood. The present study examines the association of gray matter with cognition across the entire adult lifespan, as the extant data on this important issue is surprisingly limited.

There are a few studies that have examined this relationship in middle age and younger adults. Vonk et al. (2022), as discussed above, identified a weaker but still observable coupling between rates of whole brain atrophy and changes in cognitive function in adults aged 40–59, compared to older adults of age 60 and greater, demonstrating that indeed individual rates of brain atrophy and cognitive decline are related to one another beginning in middle age at the latest. As for findings pertaining to early adulthood, Lagnes et al. (2020)'s examination of the relationship between anterior and posterior hippocampal volume and episodic memory performance identified a similar pattern—change in hippocampal volume was reliably related to change in memory performance in their sample ranging from 4 to 91 years of age, although with a stronger relationship later in life. Persson et al. (2016), similarly identified a coupling of individual rates of change in prefrontal white matter and change in fluid intelligence in an adult lifespan sample (19–79 years of age). In aggregate, these studies demonstrate that the general principle of a relationship between brain atrophy and cognitive decline occurs at midlife, and, at least in the case of the two specific relationships described by Lagnes et al. (2020) and Persson et al. (2016), early adulthood as well.

The present study aimed to further our understanding of how cognitive and brain structural change interrelate across the adult lifespan using the Dallas Lifespan Brain Study (DLBS) which followed 463 adults aged 20–88 for 8–10 years across three sampling waves and assessed both measures of brain structure and a wide array of cognitive measures. To assess the potential influence of gray matter atrophy on cognitive decline, the present study examined longitudinal changes in gray matter volume using parallel process latent growth curve modeling (PLGC, Duncan et al., 2013). This technique allows for the assessment of covariance changes (captured as longitudinal slopes of change over time) in gray matter volume (computed as a latent variable from lobular volumes) with parallel changes in cognition (derived from latent measures of speed of processing, working memory, and episodic memory). We elected to take a general approach to these issues similar to other recent studies (Cox et al., 2019, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2018; Rast et al., 2018) by examining the effect of latent gray matter volume on a latent general measure of cognition.

In the current study, this modeling approach was used to (a) determine whether there are individual differences in decline in cognition and gray matter volume, (b) incorporate individual differences in change for each variable in our models, and (c) ultimately determine whether the gray matter volume and cognition measures follow similar trajectories of change over time. In other words, we were interested in how tightly bound gray matter volume change is to cognitive change within individuals. We hypothesized that these two factors will be significantly coupled at the individual level not just in later life, but throughout the adult lifespan.

A second goal of the current study was to assess if observed rates of change in cognition and gray matter volume differ in magnitude at different points in the adult lifespan. Evidence from longitudinal assessments indicates that, in healthy individuals, loss of cortical gray matter is a continuous processes expressed throughout the

lifespan (Bethlehem et al., 2022; Fjell et al., 2014), with accelerated decline observed in select cortical and subcortical regions (see Kennedy and Raz, 2015 for a review). Similarly, there is ample evidence that general cognitive ability decreases throughout the adult lifespan, with accelerated decline with later age (Salthouse, 2016; and see Verhaeghen and Salthouse, 1997 for a meta-analytic review). We hypothesized that we would indeed observe an acceleration of decline in both factors over time, and that the change-change relationship between these two factors will be detectable and significant across the entire adult lifespan, although relatively weakest in early adulthood.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

An adult lifespan sample of 463 adults was recruited for the DLBS. Participants were invited to complete three assessments over approximately 8 to 10 years, and all participants completed at least one and a maximum of three occasions. Assessment 1 was completed in the first 2 years of the study and Assessment 2 occurred approximately 4 years later ($M_{\text{time}} = 3.9$ years, $SD_{\text{time}} = 3.9$ years) with a range of 2.47–5.8 years. Assessment 3 took place about 8 years ($M_{\text{time}} = 8.85$ years, $SD_{\text{time}} = 1.04$ years) after Assessment 1 with a range of 6.11–10.65 years. Participant age at first assessment ranged from 21 to 88 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 55.83$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.87$ years) with at least 40 participants at each decade. A total of 308 participants (66.5% of the initial sample) completed a second assessment, and 175 of those participants (37.8% of the initial sample) went on to complete the third assessment as well. Sex representation at Assessment 1 was 62% female, 38% male. All participants had a Mini-Mental State Exam score greater than or equal to 26 at the first assessment, were recruited locally from the community, and were right-handed with normal or corrected to normal vision. Participants were screened (via self-report) for neurological and psychiatric disorders, loss of consciousness for more than 10 min, a history of drug or alcohol abuse, and a history of major heart surgery or chemotherapy within 5 years. Participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1. All participants completed both a cognitive battery and an magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan at each assessment. This study was approved by and conducted in accordance with the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School institutional review boards. All participants provided written informed consent.

2.2. Cognitive measures

Cognition was examined using six tasks that served as indicators of three cognitive constructs: speed of processing, working memory, and episodic memory. The tasks are described below.

2.2.1. Speed of processing

Digit Comparison Task (DComp) (Hedden et al., 2002; adapted from Salthouse and Babcock, 1991). Participants were asked to compare strings of simultaneously presented digits (span varying between 3 and 9) and identify if each was identical or different. The outcome measure was the number of correct comparisons performed in 45 seconds.

Digit-Symbol Substitution (DSST). This is a subtask from the 3rd revision of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS-III; Wechsler, 1997). Participants were asked to translate a string of digits into a series of unfamiliar symbols using a substitution cypher, with the outcome measure being the number of digits translated correctly within 90 seconds.

Table 1
Summary of demographic characteristics and volumetric measures for the sample, grouped by total number of assessments completed

	All participants	Single assessment only	Two total assessments	Three total assessments	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
N	463	155	133	175	-	-
Age	58.24 (18.12)	60.45 (19.4)	59.09 (18.13)	55.65 (16.68)	3.12	0.045
Female %	62%	57%	66%	63%	1.46	0.233
Education (y)	15.75 (2.41)	15.35 (2.62)	15.65 (2.45)	16.18 (2.1)	5.07	0.007
MMSE	28.33 (1.8)	28.07 (2.6)	28.29 (1.3)	28.58 (1.15)	3.37	0.035
Years in study	-	-	4.83 (2.45)	8.51 (1.82)	-	-
Frontal GMV	178 × 10 ³ (25 × 10 ³)	174 × 10 ³ (25 × 10 ³)	177 × 10 ³ (26 × 10 ³)	183 × 10 ³ (23 × 10 ³)	5.05	0.007
Parietal GMV	119 × 10 ³ (16 × 10 ³)	117 × 10 ³ (17 × 10 ³)	119 × 10 ³ (17 × 10 ³)	122 × 10 ³ (14 × 10 ³)	4.14	0.017
Temporal GMV	99 × 10 ³ (13 × 10 ³)	96 × 10 ³ (14 × 10 ³)	98 × 10 ³ (14 × 10 ³)	101 × 10 ³ (12 × 10 ³)	5.42	0.005
Occipital GMV	42 × 10 ³ (6 × 10 ³)	41 × 10 ³ (6 × 10 ³)	42 × 10 ³ (7 × 10 ³)	43 × 10 ³ (6 × 10 ³)	4.49	0.012
Subcort. GMV	56 × 10 ³ (7 × 10 ³)	51 × 10 ³ (7 × 10 ³)	56 × 10 ³ (6 × 10 ³)	57 × 10 ³ (6 × 10 ³)	2.75	0.065
DComp	0.06 (0.96)	-0.08 (1.01)	-0.01 (1.1)	0.25 (0.83)	5.28	0.005
DSST	0.1 (0.97)	-0.09 (0.97)	0 (1.03)	0.36 (0.87)	10.12	< 0.001
SWM	-0.05 (1)	-0.15 (1.02)	0.22 (1.02)	0.15 (0.93)	6.12	0.02
LNS	0 (0.99)	-0.19 (0.88)	-0.15 (0.99)	0.28 (1.03)	11.92	< 0.001
VRM	0 (0.93)	-0.19 (0.91)	-0.12 (0.87)	0.26 (0.95)	11.12	< 0.001
HVLT	0.02 (0.97)	-0.16 (0.96)	-0.08 (0.94)	0.25 (0.98)	8.66	< 0.001

Columns summarize participant groups based on total number of assessments completed. All measures are as recorded at assessment one. Age is presented in years. Cortical and subcortical gray matter volumes, are presented in cubic millimeters (mm³). Cognitive assessments (including DComp, DSST, SWM, LNS, and HVLT) are presented in z-score units. Standard deviations are in parentheses. P-values less than .05 are presented in bold. P-values between .05 and .1 are presented in italics.

Key: DComp, digit comparison test; DSST, digit symbol substitution test; GMV, gray matter volume; HVLT, Hopkins verbal learning test; LNS, letter-number sequencing test; MMSE, Mini-Mental State Exam; SWM, spatial working memory test; VRM, Verbal Recognition Memory.

2.2.2. Working memory

Spatial Working Memory (SWM). This task is a subtask of the Cambridge Neuropsychological Test Automated Battery (CANTAB; Robbins et al., 1994). Participants are given an abstract figure that is a probe item (“blue token”) and are asked to search a number of simultaneously presented boxes (spanning 4–8) to locate and then move the token to a final depository. Then a new token is hidden, and this routine continues until a token has been discovered in all boxes. Within a given trial, participants must maintain which boxes they have already searched in working memory in order to avoid erroneously revisiting a box that they have already searched as each box never has a token twice. The outcome measure of this task is the inverse-coded number of search errors performed throughout all trials.

Letter-Number Sequencing (LNS). This is a subtask of the WAIS-III battery (Wechsler, 1997). Participants are presented with mixed strings of verbally presented letters and numbers in random order that range from two to eight in length. They are required to reorganize the string of items by providing an oral listing of the string, with the numbers in ascending order followed by letters in alphabetical order. The length of the string is incremented by one for each of three correct responses given. The outcome measure of this task is the total number of correct responses given before failure, or before the maximum number of trials (24) is reached.

2.2.3. Episodic memory

Immediate and Delayed Memory (HVLT): Hopkins Verbal Learning Test (Brandt, 1991). In the Immediate Recognition Task (IRT), participants were verbally presented with a list of 12 words sequentially, which they are required to recall immediately after exposure. The outcome measure of this task is the number of words remembered correctly. The Delayed Recognition Task (DRT) is administered 40 minutes later and ask participants to identify which 12 of 24 verbally and sequentially-presented words they were previously exposed to in the IRT. The outcome measure of the DRT is the number of words out of 12 that the participant correctly identified as having been previously seen. The outcome of the IRT and DRT were summed to create a single measure of memory performance (HVLT).

Verbal Recognition Memory (VRM): CANTAB (Robbins et al., 1994). The IRT is a similar recognition task to the one utilized in the HVLT, though using a different set of stimuli presented visually.

Participants are exposed to a series of 12 printed words presented sequentially. Participants are then shown a sequential list of 24 printed words, of which 12 were included in the immediately preceding wordlist. Performance in this task is the number of out of 12 that the participant correctly identifies as belonging to the immediately preceding wordlist.

2.3. Gray matter measures

Both cortical and subcortical gray matter volume were collected using the procedures described below.

2.3.1. MRI acquisition

Participants were scanned using a 3T Philips Achieva scanner with an 8-channel head coil at all three timepoints. At the third assessment, 50 participants were scanned on a newer 3T Philips Achieva scanner, which was installed in 2011, using an 8-channel head coil and identical scanning parameters. High-resolution anatomical images were collected with a T1-weighted magnetization-prepared rapid gradient-echo sequence with 160 sagittal slices, field of view = 204 × 256 × 160 mm; voxel size: 1 × 1 × 1 mm³; time to repetition: 8.1 ms; echo time: 3.7 ms; flip-angle: 12°.

2.3.2. Brain volume estimates

Cortical reconstruction and volumetric segmentation of the magnetization-prepared rapid gradient-echo sequence images taken at all three timepoints was conducted with the FreeSurfer 5.3 image analysis suite (Desikan et al., 2006; <http://surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/>), using procedures described in prior publications by others (Dale et al., 1999; Dale and Sereno, 1993; Fischl and Dale, 2000; Fischl et al., 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2004a; 2004b; Han et al., 2006; Jovicich et al., 2006; Segonne et al., 2004). Manual dura removal and control point edits for the parcellation derived from the FreeSurfer-standard regional labels were performed by a trained research team and independently assessed by an expert, as described in a prior publication (Savalia et al., 2017). Bilateral lobular volume estimates were calculated by summing the cortical parcellation constituting each of the frontal (caudal anterior cingulate, caudal middle frontal, frontal pole, medial orbitofrontal, paracentral lobule, pars opercularis, pars orbitalis, pars triangularis, posterior cingulate, precentral gyrus, rostral anterior cingulate, rostral middle frontal gyrus

and superior frontal parcellations), parietal (postcentral gyrus, pre-cuneus, superior parietal lobule, supramarginal gyrus, and isthmus parcellations), occipital (cuneus, lateral occipital lobe, lingual gyrus and pericalcarine parcellations) and temporal (banks of the superior temporal sulcus, entorhinal cortex, fusiform gyrus, inferior temporal gyrus, middle temporal gyrus, parahippocampal gyrus, superior temporal gyrus, temporal pole, transverse temporal) lobes. Considering FreeSurfer's documented difficulty in consistently segmenting subcortical regions (Mulder et al., 2014; Srinivasan et al., 2020), we elected to utilize the estimate of total bilateral subcortical gray matter volume (SCGMV) produced by the segmentation process rather than examine specific subcortical volumes. The resulting lobular cortical, and subcortical gray matter volume estimates were used in subsequent analyses.

2.4. Analysis plan

2.4.1. Principal component analysis (PCA) of cognitive measures

The cognitive data from all subjects at Assessment 1 were cast into a PCA to assess the accurate assignment of our a priori constructs (Speed of Processing, Working Memory, and Episodic Memory). The results of this PCA informed our modeling of latent cognition within the univariate and parallel process latent growth curve models defined in Section 2.4.3. This analysis was conducted using the *InPosition* package (Beaton et al., 2014) in R 4.2.2 (R Core Team, 2021). See Supplemental Section S.1 for further details.

2.4.2. Missingness analysis

Due to the attrition exhibited over the three assessments of the DLBS, we ran a series of linear mixed effect models relating our independent and dependent variables of interest (DComp, DSST, SWM, LNS, VRM, HVL, Cortical GMV, Subcortical GMV) as well as pertinent control variables (Age, Sex, Education, Mini-Mental State Exam) to the number of assessments completed by each participant. The full specifications of this analysis can be found in Supplemental Section S.1.

2.4.3. Latent growth curve modeling

A latent-growth curve structural equation modeling approach (Duncan et al., 2013) was utilized to analyze these data. All analyses were implemented in the *lavaan* library (Rosseel, 2012) in R 4.2.2 (R Core Team, 2021), with full information maximum likelihood estimation implemented under missing-at-random assumptions to use all available data for each participant. Goodness of fit of all models was assessed via comparative fit index (CFI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). As recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999) good model fit is indicated by $RMSEA \leq 0.06$, $SRMR \leq 0.08$, and $CFI \geq 0.95$, with acceptable fit indicated by $RMSEA \leq 0.08$ and $CFI \geq 0.9$.

2.4.3.1. Latent univariate growth curve models. We first developed independent univariate growth models to identify the individual developmental trajectories of the cognitive and gray matter variables over time. These time-based models had three occasions of measurement and scaled linear change across these three-time points (e.g., McArdle and Nesselrode, 2014). We also specified residual covariances over time for each variable, capturing specific sources of stable variance for each variable (Hertzog and Nesselrode, 2003). We fit both a no-growth model for each variable as well as a linear growth curve model that focused on intraparticipant change across time. Three growth models were fit, one each for cortical gray matter volume (CGMV), SCGMV, and cognition. Based on the results of our PCA (described in Section 2.4.1 and Supplemental Section S.1, results reported in Section 3.1 below) we calculated a single latent growth curve reflecting latent general

cognitive ability (GenCog) from all administered cognitive measures. Similarly, we calculated a single latent growth curve reflecting latent CGMV from the lobular volume estimates assessed at each time point. The growth curve fit to latent SCGMV was calculated from the single SCGMV estimate assessed at each time point. Data from all participants were included, with missing data accounted for using R's full information maximum likelihood estimation procedures to account for missing data. For latent variables with multiple indicators (e.g., GenCog), the regressions of variables on factors (e.g., Episodic Memory on GenCog) were constrained to be equal across the three waves of measurement (model comparisons not reported here showed that imposing invariance in factor loadings over time had no impact on model fit, justifying the assumption of longitudinal factor invariance).

2.4.3.2. Hypothesis testing using parallel-process latent growth curve models. To assess inter-relations between change-over-time in cortical and subcortical gray matter volume and general cognitive performance, we combined the univariate growth models described above into a single parallel-process latent growth curve model, as visualized in Fig. 1. In this model, the latent slope and intercept values of each of our three variables of interest (GenCog, CGMV, SCGMV) were allowed to freely covary. All other model constraints are consistent with those applied in the univariate models described above. Fig. 1 presents the measurement model for the analysis. Section A (at the top of the model), presents the measures used to create a latent construct for CGMV at each of the three assessments. These indicators of CGMV are comprised of the lobe volume for frontal, parietal, temporal, and occipital lobes based on FreeSurfer estimates. Section B, on the right side of the model, pertains to SCGMV. Due to the limited scope of our SCGMV measure, we further simplified the univariate growth model applied to the subcortical volumetric data to ensure identification of the model. Specifically, residual covariances between assessments of cortical/subcortical GMV were set to 0, and residual variances of each assessment were constrained to equal one-another. Sections C and D at the bottom of the figure reflect the latent growth curve describing general cognition, with Section C describing the slope and intercept fit to latent cognition at each assessment, and Section D indicating the individual cognitive measure which were used to estimate latent cognition at each assessment. We note that repeated measures of a given cognitive variable were allowed to freely covary, to account for repeated measures effects. Additionally, the loadings of each measured variable onto the superseding latent variable were equated across time points.

2.4.3.3. Assessing age effects via conditional models. Thus far, we have not tested the effects of age on our model. To do this, we developed a conditional version of the model displayed in Fig. 1 above that allowed us to determine if observed relationships differed as a function of age. This conditional model included regression terms for the direct effect of (baseline) age, as well as linear (age*time) and quadratic (age²*time) interaction terms applied to the latent cognition and structural variables, and is otherwise identical to the model presented in Fig. 1.

3. Results

3.1. PCA of cognitive measures

To check whether our specification of a single general cognition variable at each time point was accurate, we conducted a PCA on our time-1 cognitive data which identified a single significant ($p = 0.001$) component that explained 52.8% of the variance in cognitive measures at the first assessment (see Supplemental Section S.1). The

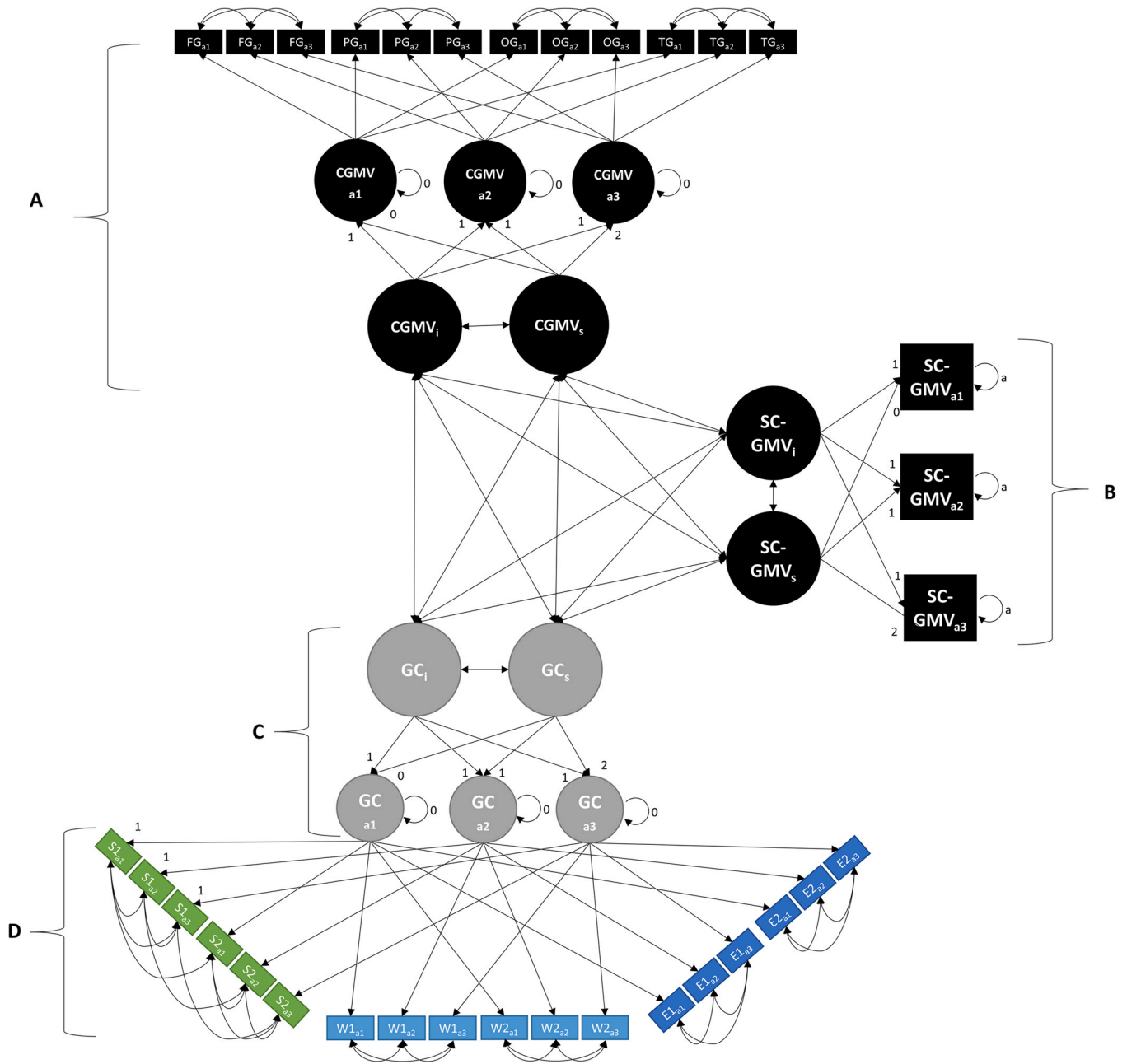


Fig. 1. Measurement diagram for parallel latent growth curve model. Sections A, B, C, and D, represent cortical gray matter, subcortical gray matter, general cognition (GenCog/ GC), and individual cognitive tasks, respectively. Subscripts a1–a3 refer to measures taken at assessment 1, 2, or 3, respectively. Subscripts *s* and *i* refer to latent slopes and intercepts, respectively. E1, verbal recall memory; E2, Hopkins Memory/HVLT; FG, frontal gray matter volume/FGMV; GC, general cognition/GenCog; OG, occipital gray matter volume/OGMV; PG, parietal gray matter volume/PGMV; S1, digit comparison; S2, DSST; TG, temporal gray matter volume/TGMV; W1, letter-number sequencing; W2, spatial working memory.

first component was comprised of all six of the cognitive measures administered (see Section 2.2) with each contributing strongly and unidirectionally to the first component. Considering this strong general component, we elected to fit all six cognitive measures to a single latent general cognition component in our growth models, as described above in Section 2.4.3.

3.2. Missingness analysis

The full specifications and results of this analysis are reported in the [Supplementary Material](#), Section S2. To summarize, we found significant effects of age, $\beta = 0.19$, $t(454) = 3.08$, $p = 0.002$, cortical

GMV, $\beta = 0.22$, $t(454) = 3.27$, $p = 0.001$, LNS, $\beta = 0.1$, $t(454) = 2.17$, $p = 0.031$, and VRM, $\beta = 0.1$, $t(454) = 2.18$, $p = 0.03$, on number of assessments completed after controlling for all other variables of interest. Importantly, all identified variables were positively related to number of assessments completed, meaning participants who were older, with greater CGMV, and greater performance on the letter-number sequencing and verbal recall memory measures were more likely to return for repeat assessments. These findings support the inclusion of participants that attrited during data collection, due to a systematic difference observed between the one-, two-, and three-session cohorts on several variables of interest. Summary statistics for each cohort can be found in [Table 1](#).

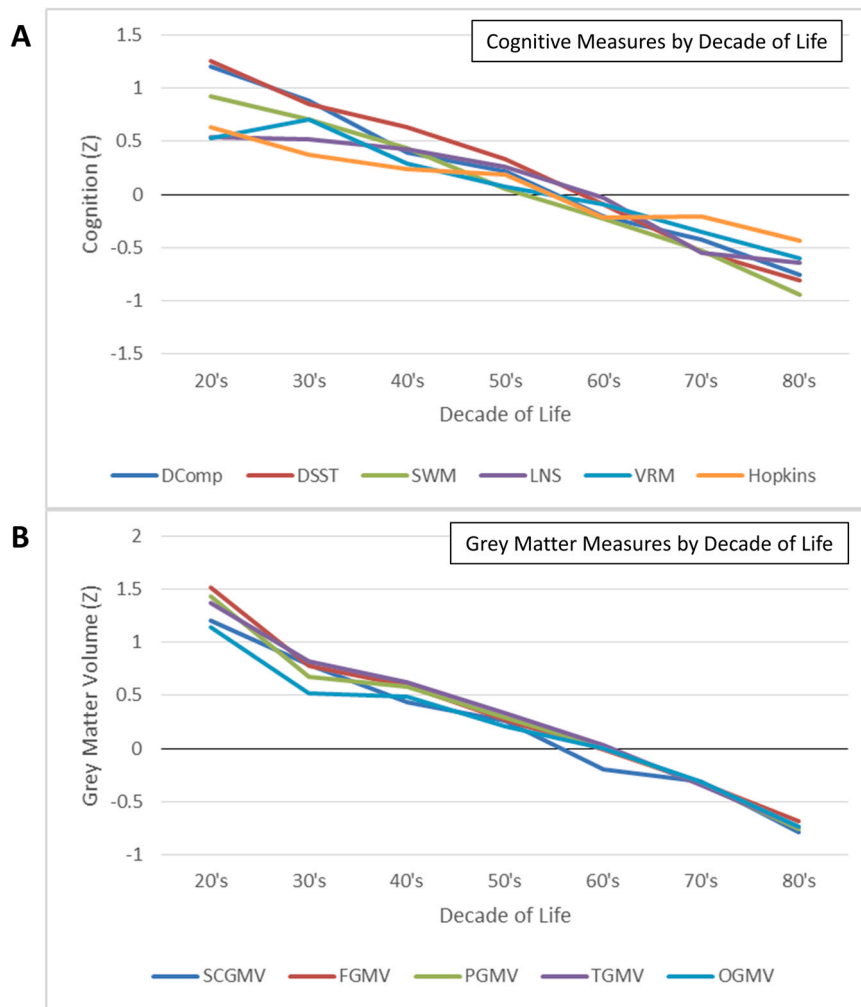


Fig. 2. Cognitive and structural measures by decade of life, as measured at first assessment. Cognitive (A) and structural (B) measures as assessed at Assessment time 1. All measures presented in normalized units (Z). Measures visualized on panel A include the digit comparison task, Digit-Symbol Substitution Test, Spatial Working Memory, Letter-Number Sequencing, Visual Recall Memory, and Hopkins Verbal Learning Test (Hopkins). Measures visualized on panel B include standardized gray matter volume estimates of the frontal lobe, parietal lobe, temporal lobe, occipital lobe, and aggregate subcortical gray matter volume.

3.3. Preliminary descriptive statistics

As can be observed in Fig. 2, panel A, at the first assessment, all cognitive measures demonstrated the expected pattern of differences between age groups, closely mirroring earlier cross-sectional studies of cognitive aging (e.g., Park et al., 2002). However, we note that in Fig. 2A there is considerable separation of measures among the 20- to 29-year-old participants which systematically decreases with age. Gray matter volume shows a similar pattern of decline across age groups at the first assessment, as depicted in Fig. 2, panel B, though this pattern is less pronounced.

Mean cognitive measures (A) and gray matter volume (B) over time are visualized in Figs. 3 and 4, respectively. In terms of gray matter volumes, decline was observed across the lifespan with mean patterns being approximately linear. Participants between 20 and 39 years of age at time of first assessment expressed steeper decline of CGMV than what would be expected based on past literature (see Fig. 3, panels A-D), although at least one study has reported a tendency for gray matter loss in the form of cortical thinning to slow over the adult lifespan (Rast et al., 2018). Our oldest participants (80+ years of age at time of first assessment) also appear to express slower decline than the other age bins visualized on Fig. 3, particularly in the parietal and occipital lobes (panels B and C), though

this is very likely the expression of survivorship bias as only the healthiest octogenarians are likely to be able volunteer for a longitudinal cognitive assessment.

In terms of cognitive measures, all examined tasks demonstrate the expected pattern of increasing speed of decline with age (see Fig. 4), which is most pronounced in our working and episodic memory measures (panels C-F). Again, our oldest participants appear to decline slower than other groups on several of these measures, reflecting a likely survivorship bias in our 80+ sample.

3.4. Univariate growth models

As shown in Table 2, both general cognition and cortical gray matter were best fit by models that demonstrated a negative linear slope as a function of time (assessments 1–3), as well as significant variance in both intercept and slope. The reliable intercept variances reflect expected individual differences in level of cognition. The reliable slope variances suggest that there are measurable amounts of individual differences in rate-of-change of these two variables, even though the mean slopes show both variables decrease on average over time. The model fit to subcortical GMV also demonstrated a significant negative linear slope, but only demonstrated significant variance in intercept, not slopes.

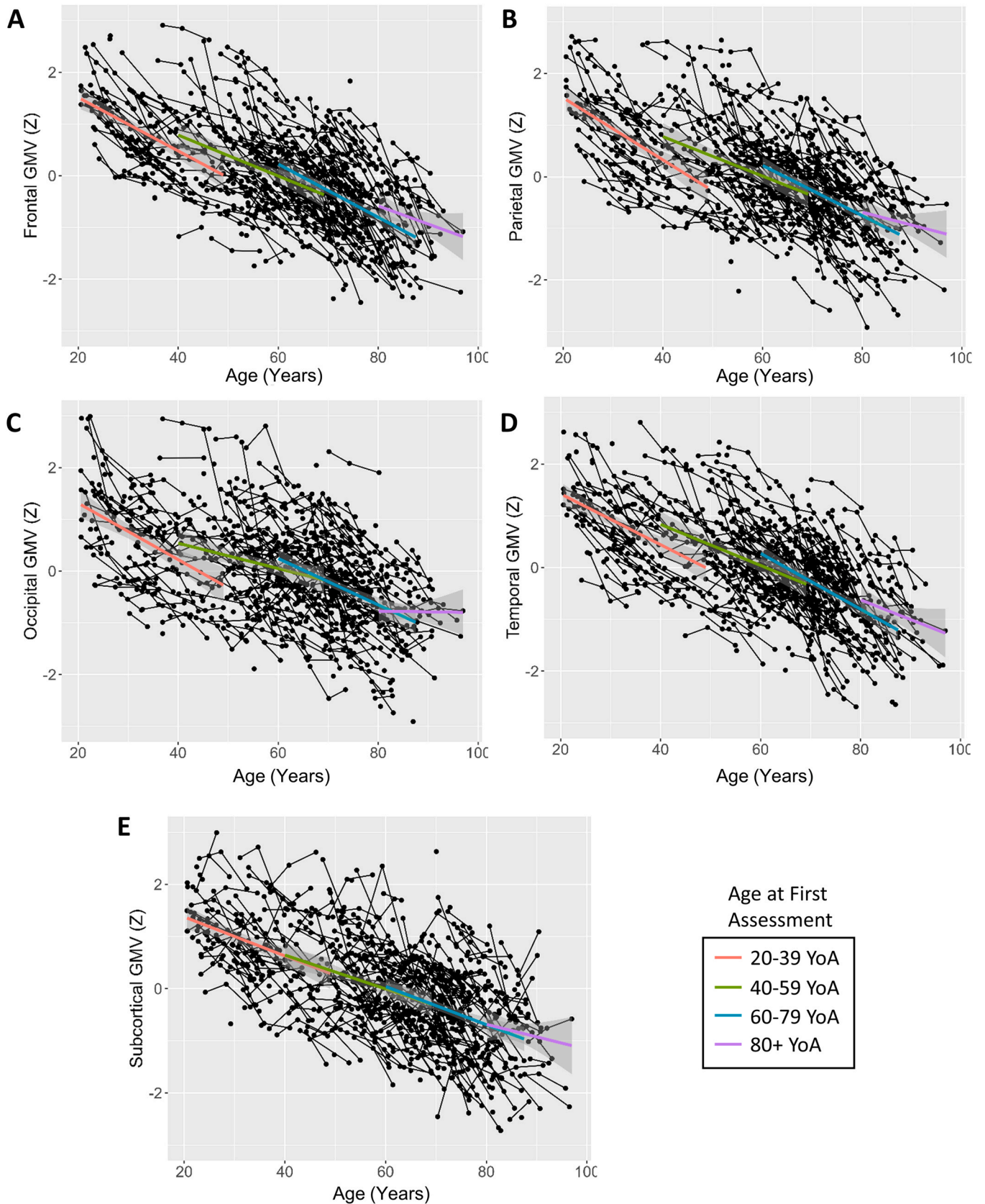


Fig. 3. Gray matter volume by age (years). Frontal (A), parietal (B), occipital (C), temporal (D), and subcortical (E) gray matter volume over time and across age. Trend lines represent mean value over time with 95% confidence intervals for each of the following age bins: 20–39, 40–59, 60–79, and 80+ years (age at first assessment). Age bins are for illustrative purposes only and were not utilized in analysis.

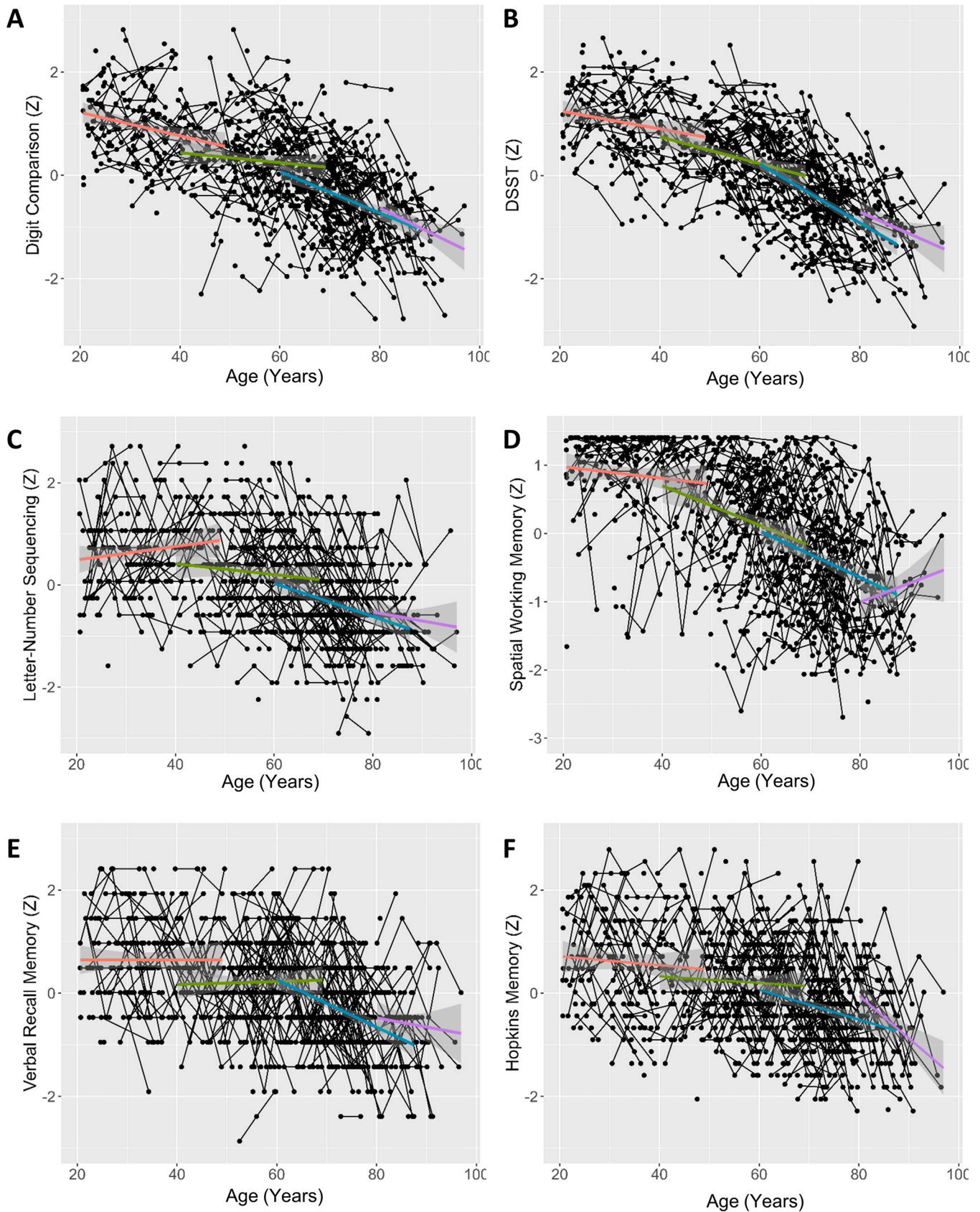


Fig. 4. Cognitive measures by age (years). Digit Comparison (A), DSST (B), Letter-Number Sequencing (C), Spatial Working Memory (D), and Verbal Recall Memory (E), and HVL (F) standardized performance over time and across age. Trend lines represent mean value over time with 95% confidence intervals for each of the following age bins: 20–39, 40–59, 60–79, and 80+ years (age at first assessment). Age bins are for illustrative purposes only and were not utilized in analysis.

Table 2
Parameter estimates for univariate growth models

	General cognition		CGMV		SCGMV	
	β (SE)	<i>p</i>	β (SE)	<i>p</i>	β (SE)	<i>p</i>
Mean						
Intercept	0.05 (0.04)	0.176	0.18 (0.05)	< 0.001	0.09 (0.05)	0.04
Slope	-0.16 (0.02)	< 0.001	-0.35 (0.02)	< 0.001	-0.2 (0.02)	< 0.001
Variance						
Intercept	0.61 (0.06)	< 0.001	1.01 (0.07)	< 0.001	0.88 (0.06)	< 0.001
Slope	0.03 (0.01)	< 0.001	0.07 (0.01)	< 0.001	0.011 (0.01)	0.169
Covariance						
Int. by Slope	0.04 (0.01)	0.004	-0.05 (0.02)	0.002	0.02 (0.02)	0.314

Key: CGMV, cortical gray matter volume; SCGMV, subcortical gray matter volume. P-values less than .05 are presented in bold.

Interestingly, the univariate latent growth models fit to general cognition and CGMV both exhibited significant intercept-slope covariance, but in opposite directions. These models are shown in Table 2. Specifically, the GenCog model exhibited a positive intercept-slope covariance, while the CGMV model demonstrated a negative intercept-slope covariance. Individuals with higher cognitive scores at baseline declined at a slower rate on general cognition than did participants with a lower cognitive scores at baseline. At the same time, higher CGMV at baseline was associated with steeper volumetric decline. This is not an unprecedented finding: Rast et al. (2018) demonstrated, in a sample of 249 middle-aged and older adults, a reverse quadratic function of cortical thinning across the cortex over 8 years of assessment, that is, a slowing of cortical thinning over time.

Although the univariate model was unable to reliably detect variance in the slope of subcortical gray matter change, it is likely that this finding reflects power issue rather than a true lack of individual variance of that term. In order to test this, we next conducted a 2-degrees of freedom generalized likelihood ratio test (Hertzog et al., 2008) to assess the power of the univariate growth model to detect variance in slope in the subcortical GMV dataset. This test trended toward significance, $\chi^2(2) = 4.76$, $p = 0.092$. Considering this, we elected to retain the subcortical GMV variable in the full PLGC model presented below.

3.5. Parallel latent growth curve model

3.5.1. The unconditional model

The parallel-process latent growth curve model combined the univariate growth models fit to cortical GMV, subcortical CMV, and general cognition and allowed those latent intercept and growth terms to be free to covary. This in turn allowed us to examine the degree to which change in these three variables was related with one another. The model demonstrated acceptable-to-good fit across all examined measures of fit (CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.08). Factor loadings of measured variables to first-order latent variables in this model are reported in Table 3. Covariance estimates for this model are reported in Table 4. Note that this unconditional model was not corrected for age – age and the age*time interaction factor were accounted for in the Conditional model reported in Section 3.5.2.

3.5.2. The conditional model accounting for age and age*time

After fitting the unconditional parallel linear growth curve model, we next fit a conditional PLGC model controlled for the effects of age as well as the age*time interaction, as explained in Section 2.4.3.3. This conditional model also demonstrated acceptable-to-good fit across all examined measures of fit (CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.07). Covariance estimates for the conditional model are reported in Table 5.

Table 3
Contribution of measured variables to first-order latent variables

General cognition measured variables				
	β	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
DComp	1	-	-	-
DSST	1.1	0.04	26.64	< 0.001
SWM	0.76	0.05	15.37	< 0.001
LNS	0.77	0.05	15.79	< 0.001
VRM	0.66	0.05	13.63	< 0.001
HVLT	0.67	0.05	14.05	< 0.001
Cortical gray matter volume measured variables				
	β	SE	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Frontal GMV	1	-	-	-
Parietal GMV	0.95	0.01	70.03	< 0.001
Temporal GMV	0.98	0.01	67.95	< 0.001
Occipital GMV	0.78	0.02	37.74	< 0.001

First-order latent variables were calculated for both general cognition and cortical gray matter volume at each assessment. Factor contributions were constrained to be equal across waves. P-values less than .05 are presented in bold.

Key: DSST, digit symbol substitution test; GMV, gray matter volume; HVLT, Hopkins verbal learning test; LNS, letter-number sequencing test; SWM, spatial working memory test; VRM, Verbal Recognition Memory.

3.5.3. Relation of variables at baseline

Assessment of the intercept-intercept covariances of the PLGC model allowed us to test if our calculated latent variables were related at a baseline level. The latent intercepts (i.e., baseline) of all the fit growth curves (CGMV, SCGMV, GenCog) were strongly inter-correlated, at p 's < 0.001 (see Table 4). The relationship was positive in all cases, indicating that individuals with higher cortical/subcortical gray matter volumes at baseline also tended to have higher cognition at baseline. However, these relationships dropped to nonsignificance after accounting for the direct effect of age and the age*time interaction on the latent intercepts (see Table 5), indicating that latent cognition, cortical GMV, and subcortical GMV are all independently related to participants' Age.

3.5.4. Relation of variables at baseline to rates of change

Assessment of the intercept-slope covariances of the PLGC model allowed us to test whether the examined variables at baseline were related to change in the examined variables over time. Looking at the relationship of baseline values of a given variables with rate of change of that variable, the within-domain intercept-slope covariances in the parallel-process model recapitulated those relationships seen in the univariate models. That is, latent intercept and slope of general cognition demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($z = 3.18$, $p = 0.001$) whereas latent intercept and slope of CGMV demonstrated a negative relationship ($z = -3.07$, $p = 0.002$). The within-domain intercept-slope covariance of subcortical GMV

Table 4

Parameter estimates describing parallel growth in cortical GMV, subcortical GMV, and general cognition

Within-domain covariances				
	β	SE	z	p
GenCog _i with GenCog _s	0.04	0.01	3.18	0.001
CGMV _i with CGMV _s	-0.05	0.02	-3.07	0.002
SCGMV _i with SCGMV _s	0.03	0.02	1.54	0.124
Intercept-intercept covariances				
	β	SE	Z	p
GenCog _i with CGMV _i	0.4	0.05	8.79	< 0.001
GenCog _i with SCGMV _i	0.34	0.04	8.02	< 0.001
CGMV _i with SCGMV _i	0.77	0.06	13.11	< 0.001
Cross-domain intercept-slope covariances				
	β	SE	Z	p
GenCog _i with CGMV _s	0.02	0.01	1.77	0.076
GenCog _i with SCGMV _s	0.03	0.02	2.13	0.033
CGMV _i with GenCog _s	0.06	0.02	3.6	< 0.001
CGMV _i with SCGMV _s	0.05	0.02	2.6	0.009
SCGMV _i with GenCog _s	0.06	0.01	4	< 0.001
SCGMV _i with CGMV _s	0.002	0.02	0.12	0.902
Slope-slope covariances				
	β	SE	z	p
GenCog _s with CGMV _s	0.01	0.004	2.45	0.014
GenCog _s with SCGMV _s	0.01	0.004	2	0.046
CGMV _s with SCGMV _s	0.01	0.01	1.65	0.098

Key: CGMV, cortical gray matter volume; GenCog, general cognitive ability; GMV, gray matter volume; SCGMV, subcortical gray matter volume. P-values less than .05 are presented in bold. P-values between .05 and .1 are presented in italics.

was not significant ($z = 1.54$, $p = 0.12$). These results indicate that a higher cognitive baseline was related to a slower decline in general cognition over the study, whereas a higher baseline cortical GMV was related to a *faster* decline in cortical GMV over the study. This negative relationship between cortical GMV baseline and rate of change persisted after controlling for age ($z = -5.53$, $p < 0.001$, see Table 5). This result suggests that the observed relationship is not due to aging alone, but rather that higher cortical volume baseline is associated with faster decline of cortical volume at any point in the adult lifespan. Interestingly, the intercept and slope of general cognition trended toward a significant, negative interaction in the conditional model as well ($z = -1.93$, $p = 0.054$), demonstrating that not only was the previously observed positive covariance a likely age effect, but that above-and-beyond age, cognition may show a similar pattern of increased rate of atrophy with greater initial ability. Considering that both cortical GMV and general cognition exhibit a negative relationship between baseline value and slope of change after controlling for age, this pattern of results may be indicative of regression to the mean.

A number of significant cross-domain relationships between baseline values and rate of change were also identified, all demonstrating positive associations. Specifically, the latent intercept of general cognition was positively related to the latent slope of subcortical GMV ($z = 2.13$, $p = 0.033$), the latent intercept of cortical GMV was positively related to the latent slopes of both general cognition and subcortical GMV (GenCog_s, $z = 3.6$, $p < 0.001$, SCGMV_s, $z = 2.6$, $p = 0.009$), and the latent intercept of subcortical GMV was positively related to the latent slope of cortical GMV ($z = 4$, $p < 0.001$). As all of these cross-domain intercept-slope covariances were positive, these results indicate that in all significant cases higher baselines were

Table 5

Parameter estimates describing parallel growth model after accounting for age and age-by-time interaction

Within-domain covariances				
	β	SE	z	p
GenCog _i with GenCog _s	-0.02	0.01	-1.93	0.054
CGMV _i with CGMV _s	-0.07	0.01	-5.53	< 0.001
SCGMV _i with SCGMV _s	~0	0.01	-0.04	0.971
Intercept-intercept covariances				
	β	SE	Z	p
GenCog _i with CGMV _i	0.02	0.02	0.993	0.321
GenCog _i with SCGMV _i	-0.01	0.02	-0.319	0.75
CGMV _i with SCGMV _i	0.002	0.01	0.188	0.851
Cross-domain intercept-slope covariances				
	β	SE	Z	p
GenCog _i with CGMV _s	0.003	0.01	0.35	0.724
GenCog _i with SCGMV _s	0.01	0.01	0.5	0.616
CGMV _i with GenCog _s	-0.003	0.01	-0.25	0.802
CGMV _i with SCGMV _s	0.02	0.01	1.46	0.144
SCGMV _i with GenCog _s	0.002	0.01	0.19	0.851
SCGMV _i with CGMV _s	-0.02	0.01	-1.5	0.134
Slope-slope covariances				
	β	SE	z	p
GenCog _s with CGMV _s	0.01	0.004	2.08	0.038
GenCog _s with SCGMV _s	0.01	0.004	1.27	0.203
CGMV _s with SCGMV _s	0.02	0.013	1.46	0.144
Regression coefficients				
	β	SE	z	p
Age ~ GenCog _i	-0.65	0.05	-12.59	< 0.001
Age ~ GenCog _s	-0.08	0.03	-2.9	0.004
Age ~ CGMV _i	-0.67	0.07	-10.12	< 0.001
Age ~ CGMV _s	-0.04	0.03	-1.35	0.177
Age ~ SCGMV _i	-0.57	0.07	-8.67	< 0.001
Age ~ SCGMV _s	-0.05	0.04	-1.32	0.186
Age*Time ~ GenCog _i	0.02	0.03	0.61	0.54
Age*Time ~ GenCog _s	0.15	0.06	2.47	0.013
Age*Time ~ CGMV _i	0.04	0.04	1.09	0.275
Age*Time ~ CGMV _s	0.01	0.04	0.35	0.729
Age*Time ~ SCGMV _i	0.01	0.04	0.34	0.736
Age*Time ~ SCGMV _s	0.06	0.04	1.61	0.107
Age ² *Time ~ GenCog _i	0.06	0.04	1.58	0.115
Age ² *Time ~ GenCog _s	-0.13	0.06	-2.1	0.036
Age ² *Time ~ CGMV _i	0.06	0.05	1.22	0.223
Age ² *Time ~ CGMV _s	-0.01	0.05	-0.11	0.913
Age ² *Time ~ SCGMV _i	0.002	0.05	0.036	0.971
Age ² *Time ~ SCGMV _s	-0.05	0.04	-1.03	0.305

Key: CGMV, cortical gray matter volume; GenCog, general cognitive ability; SCGMV, subcortical gray matter volume. P-values less than .05 are presented in bold. P-values between .05 and .1 are presented in italics.

related to slower declines in the unconditional model. However, all of these associations were reduced to nonsignificance after controlling for age and age*time interaction ($p < = 0.144$ in all cases, see Table 5), suggesting the latent baselines of CGMV, SCGMV, and general cognition were serving as a proxy for age in these relationships.

3.5.5. Slope-slope covariances

Assessment of the slope-slope covariance in our PLGC model allowed us to test if change over time in our examined latent variables

was related to change in any other of the examined latent variables. Pertinent to our primary hypothesis, change in both cortical and subcortical GMV was positively related to change in general cognition (CGMV $z = 2.45$, $p = 0.014$; SCGMV $z = 2$, $p = 0.046$), indicating that individual change in both GMV tended to align with individual change in cognition over the study. However, the latent slope of cortical and subcortical GMV did not significantly covary ($z = 1.65$, $p = 0.098$). The relationship between slope of general cognition and slope of cortical GMV remained significant even after accounting for the effects of age and the age*time interaction ($z = 2.08$, $p = 0.038$). This result supports our primary hypothesis that change in gray matter and change in cognition are coupled factors across the entire age range examined by this study.

3.5.6. Significance of age and age*time interaction terms

The conditional PLGC model allowed us both to examine relationships between latent variable in absence of age effects, but also to directly assess the power of age and the age*time interaction to explain variance in those variables. As reported on Table 5, the baseline age was found to significantly relate to the latent estimates of baseline cortical GMV ($z = -10.12$, $p < 0.001$), subcortical GMV ($z = -8.67$, $p < 0.001$), and general cognition ($z = -12.59$, $p < 0.001$). The negative direction of this association indicates a general reduction of all three capacities at older ages – at older ages individuals tended to have smaller (cortical and subcortical) gray matter volumes, and lower cognition. This age covariate was also significantly related to the slope of general cognition ($z = -2.9$, $p = 0.004$), again with a negative direction indicating faster loss of cognition in later life. This relationship is confirmed by the significant contribution of the linear and quadratic age*time interaction terms to the slope of latent cognition (linear $z = 2.47$, $p = 0.013$; quadratic $z = -2.1$, $p = 0.036$), indicating an increasing rate of cognitive decline at later ages and over time. Notably, these interaction terms did not significantly relate to either the latent cortical or subcortical GMV slope terms, suggesting that the rate of change in both gray matter measures is relatively linear throughout the lifespan.

4. Discussion

The major findings from this study are as follows, with each discussed below in turn: (a) individual change in cortical and subcortical gray matter volume was reliably related to individual change in general cognitive performance; (b) higher initial gray matter volume (both cortical and subcortical) and cognitive ability were associated with slower cognitive decline over the study period, though this effect was mitigated after accounting for age; (c) latent general cognition demonstrated accelerated rate of decline in later life, but the latent gray matter measures did not, and; (d) contrary to our hypothesis, there was evidence that higher initial CGMV was related to faster decline in cortical GMV.

4.1. Gray matter change is reciprocally related to cognitive change at the individual level

As discussed earlier in this manuscript, there is ample evidence tying longitudinal change in gray matter to cognitive function (Head et al., 2008; Lagnes et al., 2020; Nickl-Jockschat et al., 2012; Park and Reuter-Lorenz, 2009), particularly in older adults (Fletcher et al., 2018; Hunt et al., 2021; Vonk et al., 2022), and this relationship was replicated across the entire adult lifespan sample in the present study. Specifically, the parallel process model fit to our data demonstrated a strong, positive covariance between cognitive change over time and CGMV change over time—in other words, individuals who lost more gray matter also lost more cognitive function.

Similarly, those who declined in cognition showed a decrease in gray matter. Importantly, this relationship was significant after accounting for the effects of age, indicating that this relationship between individual-level change in gray matter volume and cognition is exhibited regardless of age in the lifespan sample examined in this study. These findings add to the small body of work that has demonstrated that change in gray matter volume and change in cognition are related in samples that include middle-aged and younger adult participants (Lagnes et al., 2020; Persson et al., 2016; Vonk et al., 2022). This coupling of cognitive and gray matter change throughout the adult lifespan highlights the importance of identifying factors which may differentiate patterns of neurocognitive development in middle age or earlier, for the purpose of understanding how to engender cognitively healthy later life.

4.2. Accelerating cognitive decline and stable gray matter decline

Our findings broadly replicated past findings regarding the trajectory of lifespan gray matter and cognitive decline (Bethlehem et al., 2022; Fjell et al., 2014; Salthouse, 2016; Verhaeghen and Salthouse, 1997), that is, the rate of cognitive decline accelerated throughout the lifespan, while the rate of gray matter decline (both cortical and subcortical) remained linear. This pattern is discernible when visualizing the baseline measures used to calculate the latent GMV and cognitive slopes – lobular and SCGMVs (see Fig. 2A) demonstrated a clear linear decline, while individual cognitive measures (see Fig. 2B) demonstrated varying degrees of acceleration over time. Interestingly, the four cortical volumes demonstrated very similar patterns of atrophy over time, validating our decision to use a single latent measure of aggregate cortical volume, and replicating previous findings suggesting that a widely-expressed mechanism of cortical atrophy is impactful on later life cognitive decline (Cox et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2018). This pattern of results, coupled with the significant relationship between cortical and cognitive change observed across all ages in this study, indicates that older adults are exhibiting relatively more cognitive change than younger adults coupled with an equivalent change in cortical GMV. While we did not directly assess directionality of these effects in our analysis, a possible interpretation of these results is that equivalent cortical atrophy has a larger effect on the cognitive ability of older adults compared to the cognitive ability of younger adults, if a gray matter -> cognition directional effect is assumed.

4.3. The paradoxical relationship of cortical volume to cortical atrophy and cognitive decline

Somewhat unexpectedly, baseline CGMV demonstrated opposite effects on the rate of cortical GMV and rate of cognitive decline – higher baseline cortical GMV was related to slower rates of cognitive decline, but faster rates of decline in cortical GMV over time at the individual level. This counterintuitive relationship between baseline cortical GMV and rate of cortical change is not entirely without precedent. As mentioned above, Rast et al. (2018) found a similar pattern of results to what the present study presents. Specifically, Rast et al. found that the rate of decline in cortical thickness was slowed throughout the observation period (~ 7 years) in all regions of interest examined in a middle-aged and older cohort. This pattern of slowing decline followed an inverse quadratic function, so that an individual with higher cortical thickness at any given time point was likely to express a greater rate of thickness loss – highly similar to the pattern we see in the present study. However, if this pattern was expressed universally in our sample, we would expect younger adults on average to decline more rapidly than older adults over the same span of time (considering the higher individual GMV of younger adults than older, on average). The lack of a significant age or age*time

effect on the slope of cortical GMV loss suggests that this is not the case – on average, the rate of cortical GMV loss appears to be stable across the adult lifespan, while at the individual level higher baseline cortical GMV is related to faster atrophy. A parsimonious explanation of such a finding would be regression toward the mean – a pattern of extreme scores falling closer to the group average at later assessments could lead to this pattern of a greater negative slope of CGMV change associated with higher baseline values. This finding will need to be replicated to verify that it is reliable.

Conversely, higher baseline cortical GMV was related to a slower rate of cognitive decline in the unconditional PLGC model. While this relationship might be interpreted as some sort of protective factor, the effect was entirely accounted for after including the age covariate in the conditional PLGC model. Therefore, this relationship is likely age-mediated – younger participants tended to have higher CGMV coupled with slower cognitive decline.

4.4. Contribution of measured to latent variables

A key benefit of using the parallel process models implemented above, aside from allowing us to examine patterns of covariance among our variables of interest, is that it allowed us to assess the relative contribution of our measured variables to the latent variables calculated in the model. In terms of cognitive measures, the two included measures of processing speed (Digit Comparison and DSST) had relatively stronger contribution to the calculated latent cognition variable than did any of our other cognitive measures ($\beta \sim 1.1$ vs. $\beta \sim 0.7$, see [Table 3](#)). This is an interesting finding in light of the known sensitivity of processing speed measures to age-related cognitive decline ([Salthouse, 1996](#)). However, the significant contribution of all six measures to the latent cognition construct suggest that what we are capturing in the present study is indeed a broad cognitive construct, rather than a speed-dominated one.

In terms of cortical gray matter measures, occipital volume was found to be underrepresented in the latent cortical volume construct compared to volume of the other three lobes ($\beta \sim 0.7$ vs. $\beta \sim 1$). This relative lack of contribution of the occipital lobe to the latent cortical gray matter construct may be a reflection of relatively little variance over time in occipital regions of the brain, as has been documented by earlier studies ([Raz et al., 2005](#); [Raz and Kennedy, 2009](#)), though note that occipital volume in our sample does express decline over time (see [Fig. 1](#), panel D and [Table 1](#)). Occipital volume did significantly contribute to the cortical GMV construct despite this relatively lower weighting, indicating a reduced but still present contribution of occipital volume variance to the latent cortical variable examined in the model above.

4.5. Implications for theories of cognitive aging

The key finding of this paper is that the processes of cortical gray matter loss and cognitive decline are coupled on an individual level, not just in later life but across the adult lifespan. The implication of this finding is that the processes which serve to differentiate individual patterns of neurocognitive decline are similarly operating throughout the lifespan. Aging research has been incrementally bolstering our understanding of the nature of cognitive and structural change in midlife and earlier, and the results of the present study further emphasize the importance of understanding cognitive and brain aging as a lifelong process, where earlier deviations in cognitive and brain health may very well have downstream consequences on cognitive performance in later age.

We note that the findings are partially supportive of the Scaffolding Theory of Aging and Cognition (STAC) proposed by [Park and Reuter-Lorenz \(2009\)](#) and revised by [Reuter-Lorenz and Park \(2014\)](#). The model proposes that the cognitive and structural decline

observed exhibit bidirectional influences which serve to differentiate individual patterns of decline – structural and functional alterations lead to age-related cognitive decline, while *scaffolding* processes operating in the functional (i.e., compensatory recruitment), structural (i.e., neurogenesis), and cognitive (i.e., learning, strategy adoption) domains work to counteract this decline. The revised STAC model presented in 2014 ([Reuter-Lorenz and Park, 2014](#)) further posits that these opposing enrichment and depletion processes are lifespan processes, rather than only impactful in later life. The findings of the present study validate specifically the individual coupling of structural and cognitive change factors proposed by the STAC model, as well as that this relationship is relevant throughout the adult lifespan. Importantly, the present study does not allow us to disambiguate between compensatory and decline processes – the covariance of individual rates of cortical and cognitive change supports that these processes are reciprocally linked, but this does not grant us any insight onto the specific mechanisms influencing individual patterns of decline. These mechanisms are in all likelihood heterogeneous between individuals – one participant showing a slow rate of decline may be engaging in successful scaffolding procedures, while another might experience slower rates of neurocognitive change due to preexisting (genetic/environmental) advantages, for example. Further study is needed to disambiguate these competing influences on neurocognitive decline processes.

4.6. Limitations and future directions

As with any study, the present results should be interpreted with consideration of its limitations. First, retention was found to be related to higher cognitive performance and more robust gray matter at baseline assessment across nearly all measures examined (see [Table 1](#) and [Supplementary Section S.2](#)), indicating that cognitively healthier individuals with more baseline gray matter were more likely to return for following assessments. Practically, this means that we have, in all likelihood, underestimated the rate of both cognitive and structural decline observed in this study, as only those individuals who expressed less decline in either or both categories returned for follow-up assessments. This implies that our results are most generalizable to a healthier sample. This is not an unprecedented finding ([Rast et al., 2018](#); [Salthouse, 2014](#)), and indeed this self-selection of healthier retained participants is a confound relevant to most if not all longitudinal studies in the field. A second limitation is that, despite the large sample size, our model was sufficiently complex to preclude statistically powerful investigation of subgroup effects within this model, which inhibited our ability to examine specific effects. We can best address this issue by designing simpler models with lower power requirements than the present model, although the models will likely have lower correspondence to actual brain/behavior relationships than the present more complex model does. A promising approach to solving the power problem will be to adopt a large, collaborative effort to aggregate MRI data from multiple such longitudinal studies of cognitive aging, as [Bethlehem et al. \(2022\)](#) did. Overcoming recruitment and retention hurdles is a perennial challenge in longitudinal research, and while large efforts such as the DLBS and many others have succeeded in creating usable datasets that have produced insightful results, the limitations of the present paper are representative of the limitations that most such studies face.

Ethics Statement

All procedures described in this manuscript were performed under the oversight and with the approval of the Ethics Review Board (ERB) of the University of Texas at Dallas. All participants provided informed consent prior to involvement in the study.

Author contributions

Evan T. Smith performed the analyses, authored the first draft of the manuscript, and co-authored the final manuscript. Joseph P. Hennessee performed data imputation and provided statistical and methodological consultation. Gagan S. Wig oversaw MRI data cleaning efforts. Sarah Frank, Julia Bacci, and Hector Gonzales collected behavioral and MRI data and performed behavioral data cleaning. Micaela Chan collected MRI data, oversaw MRI cleaning efforts and performed MRI cleaning. Claudia A. Carreno performed MRI data cleaning. Christopher Hertzog provided statistical and methodological consultation. Kristen M. Kennedy and Karen M. Rodrigue assisted in the design of the study and edited the final manuscript. Denise C. Park designed the study and co-authored the final manuscript.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Evan T. Smith: Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Joseph P. Hennessee:** Validation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Gagan S. Wig:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Sarah Frank:** Investigation, Data curation, Supervision. **Julia Bacci:** Investigation, Data curation, Project administration. **Hector Gonzales:** Investigation. **Micaela Chan:** Investigation, Data curation. **Claudia A. Carreno:** Investigation. **Chris Hertzog:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Kristen M. Kennedy:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Karen M. Rodrigue:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Denise C. Park:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Data availability

Data and analysis scripts used in this study are available upon request to the corresponding author, and the DLBS dataset will be made publicly available in the future.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no actual or potential conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.neurobiolaging.2023.04.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neurobiolaging.2023.04.014).

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