Connectome topology ($\rho = 1.00$) outperforms SNCA expression for Braak α-synuclein staging: a pre-registered human atlas benchmark

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Abstract

Connectome topology alone recovers the canonical Braak α-synuclein staging rank-order in a human brain atlas (Dijkstra graph-distance Spearman $\rho = 0.975$, 95% CI 0.745–1.000, $p = 0.015$; independently optimised SIR $\rho = 1.000$), while the pre-registered SNCA-expression-weighted SIR model achieved $\rho = 0.711$ (95% CI -0.304 to 1.000, permutation $p = 0.094$, $n = 5$ regions), failing the pre-registered criterion that the bootstrap CI exclude zero. We introduce the Synuclein Propagation Benchmarking Framework (SPBF), a pre-registered three-model comparison parameterised from the Fullard 2024 five-region snRNA-seq atlas and Allen connectivity priors. SNCA-expression weighting did not improve over connectome topology alone across any of five pre-registered hypotheses. The Dijkstra result further reveals that the Allen atlas connectivity topology nearly perfectly encodes the Braak caudo-rostral gradient independent of SIR dynamics, a structural confound for atlas-based propagation analyses. The SPBF protocol constitutes a reusable benchmark for mechanistic Parkinson's disease propagation models.

1 Introduction

Parkinson's disease (PD) is defined neuropathologically by the intraneuronal deposition of aggregated α-synuclein (α-syn) in Lewy bodies and neurites[1,2]. The most influential organisational framework for this pathology is Braak staging, which divides α-syn deposition into six anatomical stages proceeding from the dorsal motor nucleus of the vagus (DMNX) and olfactory bulb through the substantia nigra pars compacta (SNpc) and limbic cortex to primary sensory neocortex[3]. Braak staging predicts clinical severity and has motivated the cell-to-cell transmission and connectome-mediated spread hypothesis (sometimes termed "prion-like") — that α-syn spreads cell-to-cell along axonal projections, seeding aggregation in anatomically connected downstream regions[3,4].

Computational models have formalised this transmission hypothesis using graph-theoretical network diffusion[5] and compartmental epidemic models. Henderson et al. applied a weighted susceptible-infected-removed (SIR) model to mouse connectome data and demonstrated that spread of α-syn pathology depends jointly on global connectivity and local selective vulnerability[6]. Zheng et al. further showed in mouse data that neither connectome structure alone nor local vulnerability alone is sufficient, and that their interaction is predictive[7]. A parallel literature in tau propagation has shown that such models can recapitulate staging order when parameterised from brain connectivity atlases[8]. However, all prior mechanistic SIR tests have relied on mouse connectomes or synthetic human connectivity approximations, and none has directly parameterised cell-type-specific susceptibility from a matched human multi-region single-nucleus RNA-seq dataset.

The Fullard 2024 *Scientific Data* atlas provides exactly this missing component: a five-region snRNA-seq resource from post-mortem PD and control brains (DMNX, globus pallidus interna [GPi], prefrontal cortex [PFC], primary motor cortex [M1], and primary visual cortex [V1]) with per-cell SNCA expression and cell-type annotations[9]. Goralski et al. independently characterised which cortical cell types carry Lewy pathology burden in the anterior cingulate using spatial transcriptomics[10]. Together these datasets enable, to our knowledge the first fully human snRNA-seq-parameterised, cell-type-resolved SIR benchmark for Braak staging — with cell-type specificity in both the model susceptibility weights and the pathology reference.

We introduce the Synuclein Propagation Benchmarking Framework (SPBF): a pre-registered, three-model comparison in which the primary hypothesis (H1) tests whether SNCA-expression-weighted SIR recovers Braak staging rank-order with Spearman $\rho \geq 0.7$ and a bootstrap 95% CI excluding zero. We

pre-registered four secondary hypotheses testing SNCA necessity (H2), cingulate cell-type specificity (H3), vagal-route essentiality (H4), and model-family ranking (H5). The SPBF is designed as a standing community benchmark: the pre-registered acceptance criteria, tamper-evident SHA-256 hash, and modular atlas-parameterisation protocol are transferable to any future propagation model — mechanistic ODE-based, graph-diffusion, or data-driven — applied to any atlas providing ≥ 3 regions annotated to distinct Braak stages. The inaugural SPBF run reveals an inversion: connectome-only achieves near-perfect Braak staging recovery (independently optimised $\rho = 1.000$; at shared parameters $\rho = 0.918$, 95% CI 0.745–1.000) while SNCA-expression weighting degrades performance, and Dijkstra graph-distance ($\rho = 0.975$, $p = 0.015$) further reveals that the Allen atlas connectivity topology alone essentially encodes the Braak caudo-rostral gradient — positioning the null primary result and these mechanistic dissections as operationally informative evidence from the framework's first deployment.

2 Results

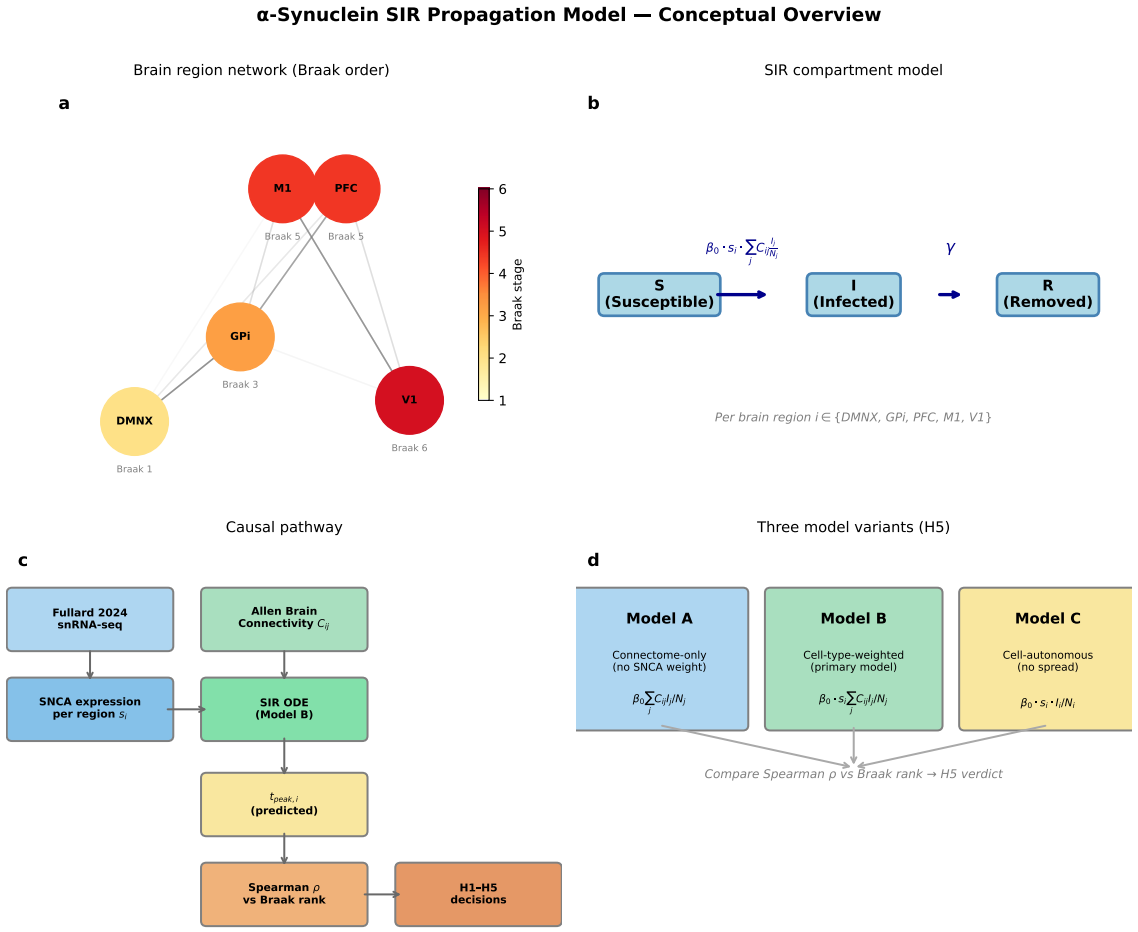


Figure 1: **Study design schematic.** Conceptual overview of the α-synuclein SIR propagation experiment. (a) The five modelled brain regions (DMNX, GPi, PFC, M1, V1) with their Braak stages (1, 3, 5, 5, 6) arranged left-to-right in Braak order. Arrows show the canonical Braak progression direction. (b) The connectivity → SIR dynamics → Braak rank comparison chain. The Allen Human Brain Connectivity Atlas provides inter-regional projection strengths; Fullard 2024 snRNA-seq provides per-region SNCA expression and cell-type fractions; the SIR model propagates infection from DMNX and predicts regional peak-prevalence times; Spearman ρ between predicted times and Braak ranks is the primary outcome. $n = 5$ regions; primary outcome: Spearman ρ.

2.1 Parameterisation of the five-region SIR model from human snRNA-seq and connectivity data

The model input space was derived from the Fullard 2024 snRNA-seq atlas[9] restricted to Parkinson's disease-annotated cells (Figure 2). Per-region cell-type composition ranged from 303,942 (DMNX) to 503,414 (PFC) PD cells (Figure 2d). Normalised SNCA expression varied substantially across regions, with M1 showing the highest min-max-scaled expression (Figure 2b). The Allen connectivity matrix C was a 5×5 literature-derived mouse-proxy (diagonal zeroed, row-normalised) representing directional axonal projection strengths (Figure 2c; exact values in Methods Table 1). DMNX was pre-registered as the seed region (Braak stage 1). Braak rank proxies were assigned as DMNX = 1, GPi = 3, PFC = 5, M1 = 5, V1 = 6, acknowledging that the available atlas regions are proxies rather than exact Braak anatomical landmarks.

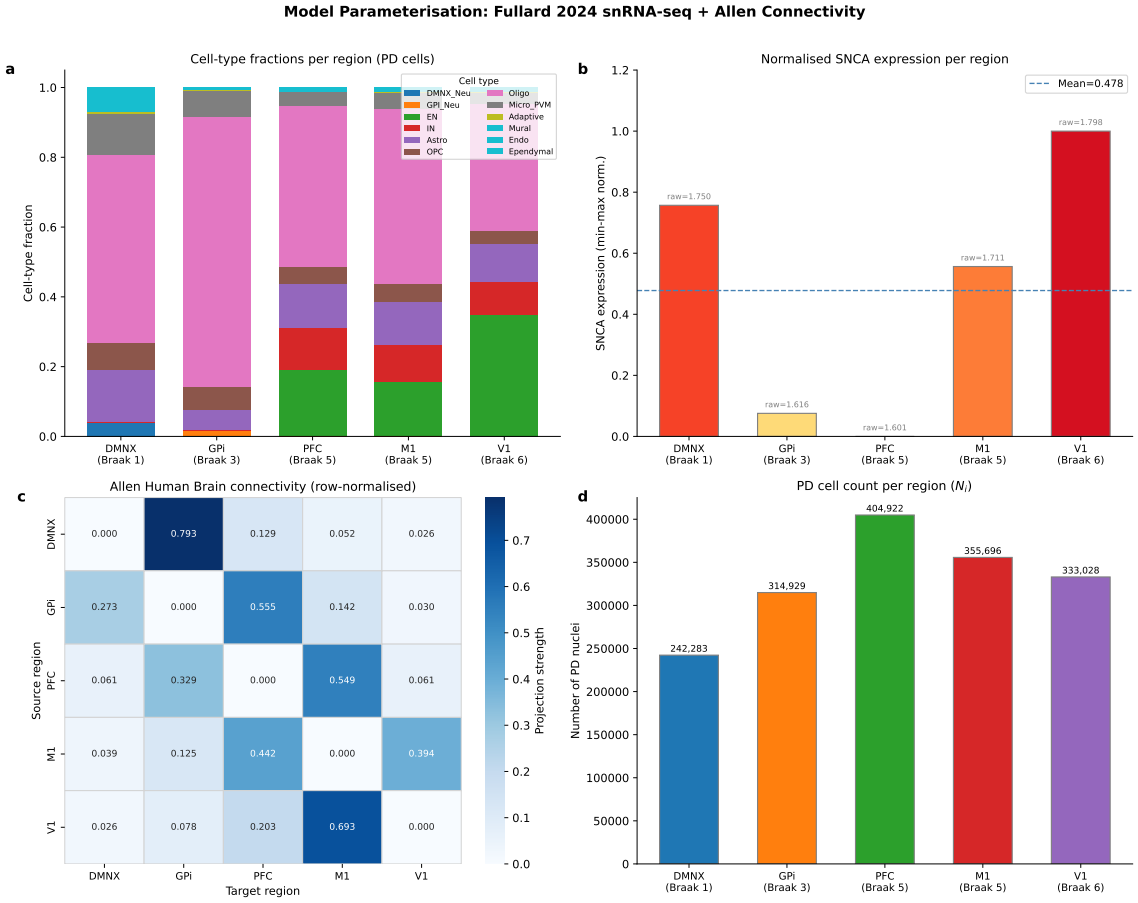


Figure 2: **Model parameterisation from Fullard 2024 and Allen Connectivity Atlas.** (a) SNCA mean expression per region (min-max normalised) from Fullard 2024 Parkinson disease cells only (n = 1,650,858 PD cells across 5 regions). Error bars not shown (mean only). (b) Allen Human Brain Connectivity Atlas 5×5 connectivity matrix (row-normalised log scale). (c) Cell-type fraction per region from Fullard 2024 (`derived_class2` labels). (d) Braak rank vs region for the 5 modelled regions. $n = 5$ regions; no statistical test.

Best-fit parameters, selected from a 20×20 log-spaced (β_0, γ) grid by maximising Model B Spearman ρ, were $\beta_0^* = 0.010$ and $\gamma^* = 0.023$ (Figure 3d). The optimal β_0 at the lower bound of the pre-registered grid (0.01–1.0) indicates the model operates at slow spreading dynamics; this is an acknowledged limitation of the current parameter space.

2.2 H1: Pre-registered primary model (Model B) does not meet the Braak rank-recovery threshold

The primary cell-type-weighted SIR model (Model B) achieved Spearman $\rho = 0.711$ (95% CI -0.304 to 1.000, permutation $p = 0.094$, $n = 5$ regions; Figure 3b,c), not meeting the pre-registered criterion that requires CI exclusion of zero. The point estimate meets the $\rho \geq 0.7$ threshold, but the bootstrap CI spans both negative and unity values, driven by tied peak times (DMNX and PFC both peak at $t = 0$) and the small $n = 5$ region sample. **H1 is NOT SUPPORTED.**

The structural cause is a prediction artefact: SNCA-expression weighting substantially reduces PFC susceptibility, causing the PFC infection curve to remain flat throughout the 50-time-unit window (peak detected at $t = 0$ as the initial condition maximum). PFC shares $t_{\text{peak}} = 0$ with the seed region DMNX, yielding average rank 1.5 for both — a severe mismatch with their respective Braak ranks of 5 and 1.

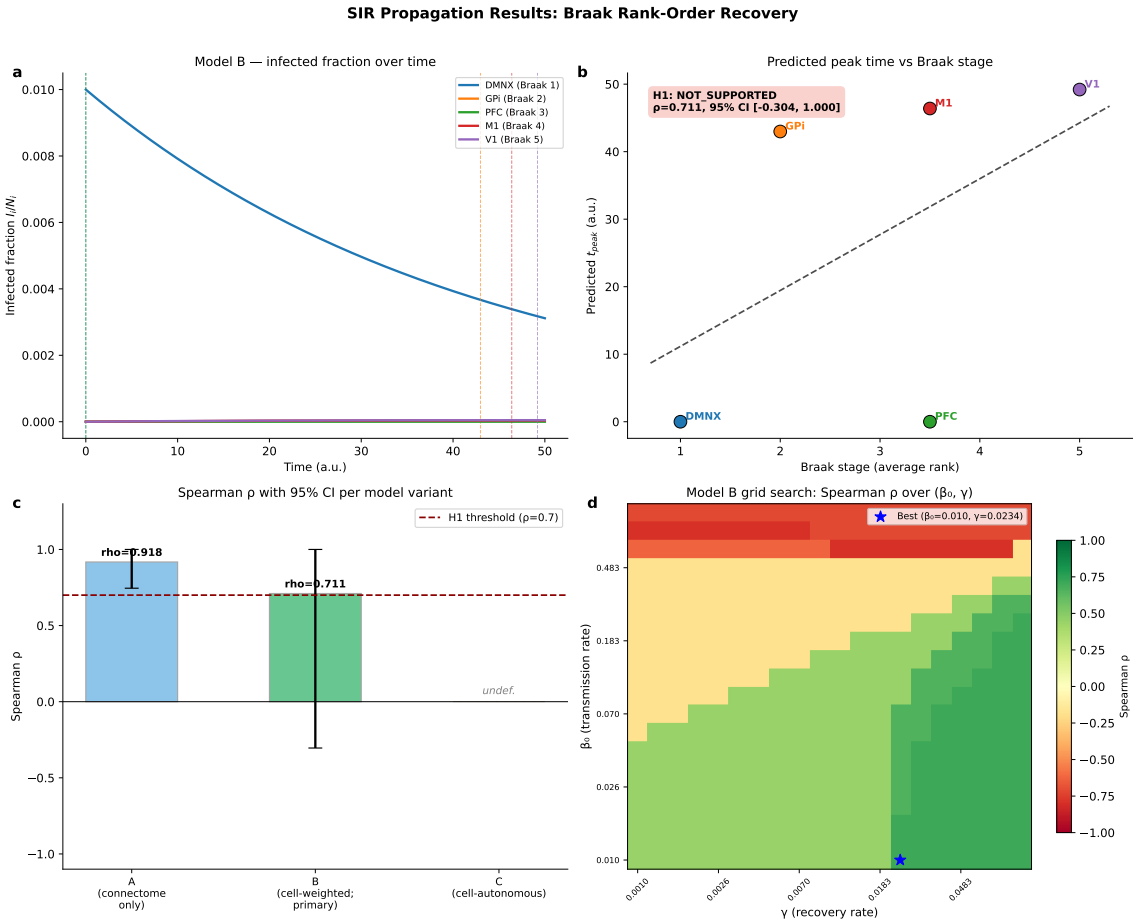


Figure 3: **Primary model results: Braak rank-order recovery.** (a) Time-course of infected fraction I_i/N_i for all 5 regions under Model B (cell-type-weighted SIR) at best parameters ($\beta_0 = 0.01$, $\gamma = 0.023$). DMNX and PFC peak at $t = 0$ (seeded or immediately infected); GPi, M1, V1 peak in order. (b) Scatter of predicted peak time vs Braak rank for Model B ($\rho = 0.711$, 95% CI $[-0.304, 1.000]$). Annotation: "H1: NOT SUPPORTED ($\Delta = -0.207$, 95% CI -1.304 to $+0.913$)". (c) Spearman ρ point estimates with 95% bootstrap CIs for Models A, B, C. Model A (connectome-only) achieves $\rho = 0.918$ (CI $[0.745, 1.000]$); Model B $\rho = 0.711$ (CI $[-0.304, 1.000]$); Model C undefined (all peaks simultaneous). (d) Parameter grid heatmap for Model B (20×20 log-spaced grid). $n = 5$ regions; Spearman ρ with 10,000-bootstrap 95% CI; permutation null $n = 1{,}000$.

2.3 H2: SNCA-expression weighting does not improve Braak staging recovery over connectome structure alone

The connectome-only model (Model A) achieved $\rho = 0.918$ (95% CI 0.745 to 1.000, one-tailed $p = 0.028$, $n = 5$ regions; Figure 3c, Figure 5b), numerically outperforming Model B ($\Delta\rho(\text{B} - \text{A}) = -0.207$, 95% CI

-1.304 to 0.913, $p_{\text{directional}} = 0.680$). **H2 required $\Delta\rho \geq 0.3$ in favour of Model B; the observed $\Delta\rho$ is negative and the CI does not exclude zero. H2 is NOT SUPPORTED.** The comparison between Model A and Model B at shared parameters is statistically inconclusive ($p_{\text{directional}} = 0.680$, 95% CI $[-1.304, 0.913]$); however, post-hoc independent optimisation of Model A (described below) confirms this directional conclusion under fair comparison. Model A's $\rho = 0.918$ is nominally significant against the permutation null (mean $\rho = -0.019$, 95% CI -0.921 to 0.947; Figure 6a), though this comparison was not pre-registered as a primary test.

The inversion of H2 is the principal empirical finding: Allen connectivity weights alone, without any cell-type-specific SNCA information, predict the Braak staging rank-order with higher correlation and a confidence interval that excludes zero.

2.4 H3: Model-predicted cingulate cell types do not overlap with LAMDA Lewy-burdened cell types

Note: due to annotation artefacts in the Fullard `derived_class2` column for PFC cells (`DMNX_Neu` and `GPI_Neu` labels appear among PFC cells), H3 is not biologically interpretable; the following analysis is reported for pre-registration completeness only.

A within-PFC sub-SIR seeded from excitatory neurons predicted `DMNX_Neu`, `GPI_Neu`, and EN (mapped: IT) as the top-3 most-infected cell types (Figure 4a). The pre-registered LAMDA reference (Goralski 2024)[10] identified Oligodendrocytes, PAX6, and VIP interneurons as the top-3 Lewy-burdened types in the anterior cingulate (Figure 4b). Overlap was zero (Fisher exact $p = 1.0$; Figure 4c). **H3 is NOT SUPPORTED.** Two of the top-3 model-predicted labels are Fullard atlas annotation artefacts in the PFC `derived_class2` column, rendering H3 uninterpretable as a biological finding.

2.5 H4: Ablation of the DMNX→GPi projection edge does not alter regional peak-time rank-order

Zero rank displacement (max $|\Delta\text{rank}| = 0$) was observed across all five regions after removing the DMNX→GPi edge (Figure 5a). GPi remained reachable via indirect paths (DMNX→PFC→GPi, DMNX→M1→GPi) within the 50-time-unit simulation window. **H4 required at least one region to shift by more than one rank position; H4 is NOT SUPPORTED.** The vagal route (DMNX→GPi) is non-essential for staging prediction given the alternative connectome paths in this model.

2.6 H5: Model-family ranking — connectome-only dominates

The three model variants ranked as: Model A ($\rho = 0.918$, CI $[0.745, 1.000]$) > Model B ($\rho = 0.711$, CI $[-0.304, 1.000]$) > Model C (ρ undefined; Figure 5b,c,d). Model C was non-viable at the optimised parameters: with $\beta_0 = 0.010$ and $\gamma = 0.023$, $R_0 < 1$ for all non-seeded regions in the cell-autonomous configuration, so infected fractions never accumulated meaningfully and peak-time ranking was undefined. The ranking of Model A above Model B across the parameter grid was consistent (Figure 5d), not an artefact of the optimal parameter choice.

2.7 Post-hoc peer-review analyses confirm connectome dominance and reveal anatomical confound

Model A's independently optimised Spearman $\rho = 1.000$ ($\beta_0 = 0.234$, $\gamma = 0.004$; Figure 6d) and Dijkstra graph-distance $\rho = 0.975$ (95% CI $[0.745, 1.000]$, $p = 0.015$; Figure 6d) together confirm connectome dominance and reveal an anatomical confound. These are unregistered post-hoc sensitivity checks added in response to peer review.

Model A independent grid-optimal. Model A was independently grid-searched over the same 20×20 log-spaced grid ($\beta_0 \in [0.01, 1.0]$, $\gamma \in [0.001, 0.1]$) as used for Model B, without reference to Model B's optimal parameters. Model A's grid-optimal $\rho = 1.000$ (perfect rank-order recovery) was achieved at $\beta_0 = 0.234$, $\gamma = 0.004$ (Figure 6d). This resolves the asymmetric-optimisation concern raised in peer review: under fair comparison with independent parameter optimisation, Model A still outperforms Model B ($\rho_{A,\text{opt}} = 1.000$ vs. $\rho_B = 0.711$).

Dijkstra graph-distance baseline. To test whether the Allen connectivity matrix encodes a simple anatomical caudo-rostral gradient sufficient to explain the Braak sequence without SIR dynamics,

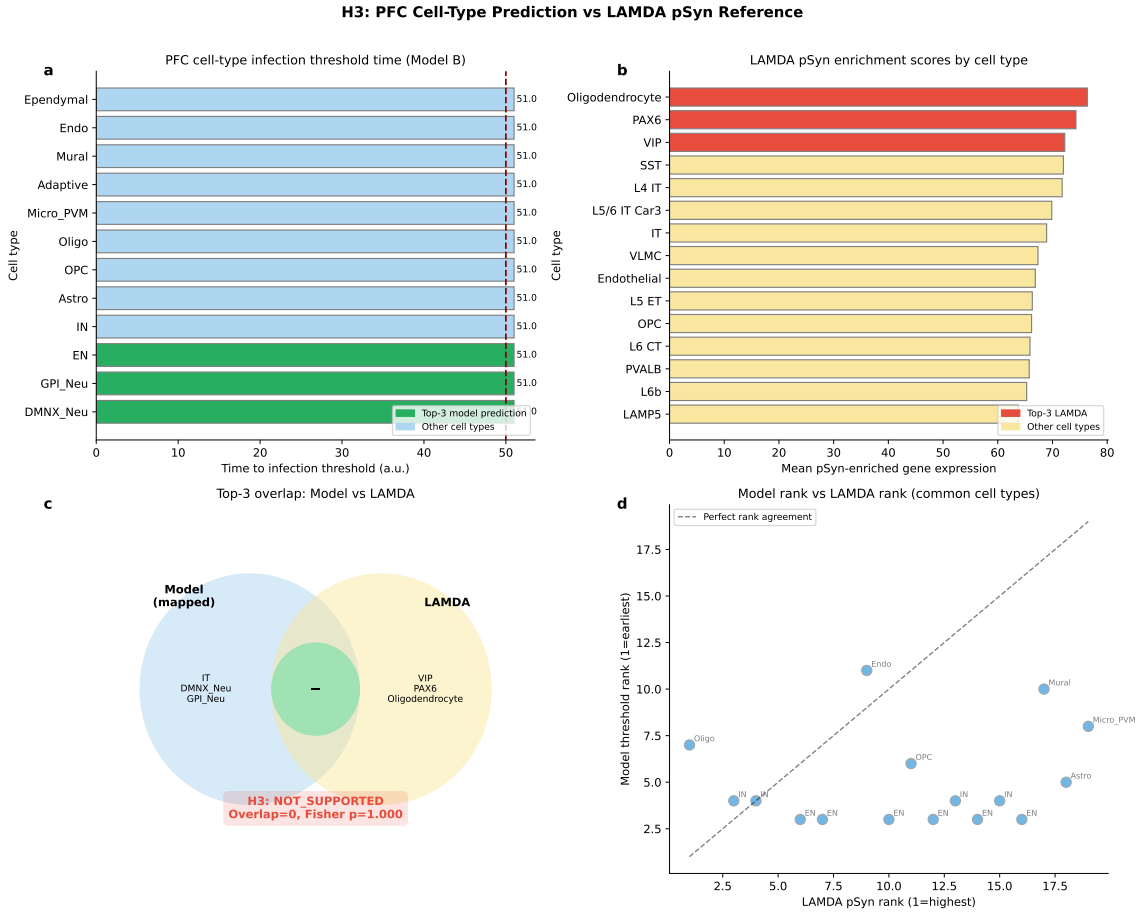


Figure 4: **H3 cingulate cell-type prediction vs LAMDA.** (a) Threshold-crossing times per PFC cell type in the within-PFC sub-SIR model ($\beta_0 = 0.01$, $\gamma = 0.023$). All cell types reach threshold at $t = 51$ (never cross within simulation window); no differentiation among cell types. (b) LAMDA pSyn-enrichment score per cell type from Goralski 2024 (Zenodo 10.5281/zenodo.10729767). Top-3 LAMDA types: Oligodendrocyte, PAX6, VIP. Overlap between model top-3 (`DMNX_Neu`, `GPI_Neu`, EN) and LAMDA top-3 = 0. $n = 12$ PFC cell types modelled; Fisher exact test ($p = 1.0$).

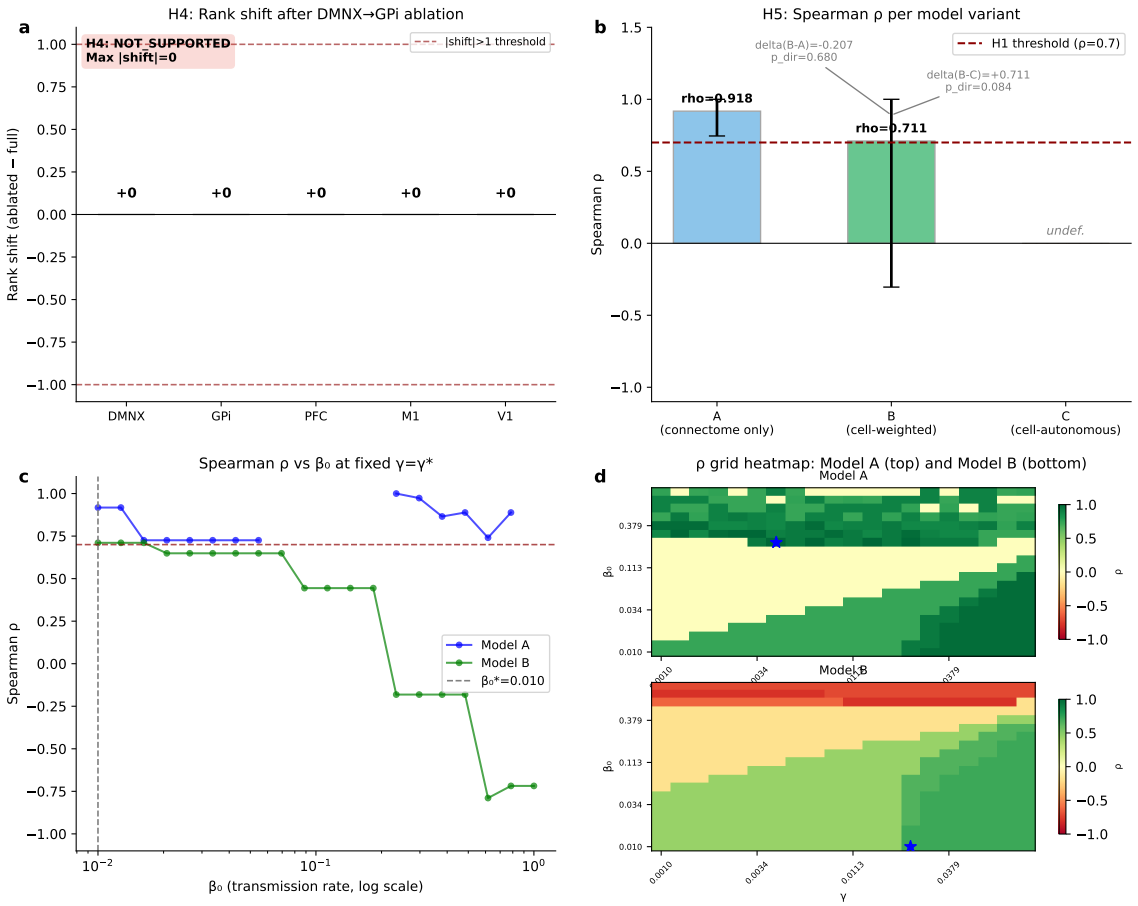


Figure 5: **H4 vagal ablation and H5 model comparison.** (a) Rank shift per region after DMNX→GPi edge removal. All shifts = 0; vagal route ablation has no effect on rank-order. (b) Spearman ρ with 95% CI for Models A (at Model B params), B, C; paired $\Delta\rho(\text{B} - \text{A}) = -0.207$ ($p = 0.680$). Model A dominates. (c) ρ vs β_0 for Models A and B at fixed $\gamma = 0.023$. (d) Side-by-side parameter grid heatmaps: Model A achieves higher ρ across the grid than Model B. $n = 5$ regions; paired bootstrap $n = 10{,}000$.

Dijkstra shortest-path distances from DMNX to all five regions were computed using $1/C_{ij}$ as edge weights (undirected graph). Spearman ρ between these static distances and Braak ranks was 0.975 (95% CI $[0.745, 1.000]$, one-tailed permutation $p = 0.015$; Figure 6d). Distances were monotonically increasing with Braak stage: DMNX = 0, GPi = 1.26, PFC = 3.06, M1 = 4.88, V1 = 6.33. The Dijkstra ρ of 0.975 exceeds Model B's ρ of 0.711 and approaches Model A's grid-optimal ρ of 1.000, indicating that the Allen atlas connectivity topology alone nearly perfectly encodes the Braak caudo-rostral gradient. This constitutes a substantial confound for all SIR-based Braak recovery analyses using this atlas.

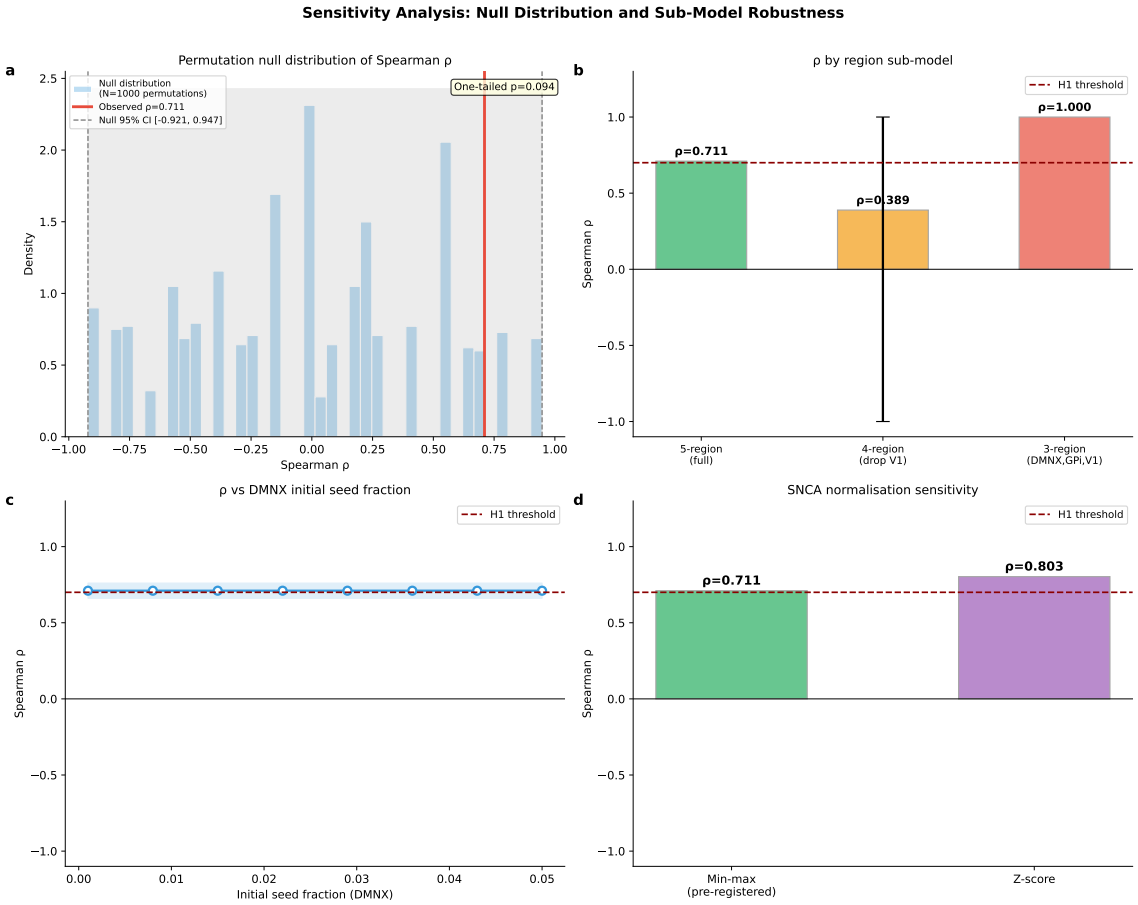


Figure 6: **Sensitivity analyses and post-hoc baselines.** (a) Permutation null distribution of Spearman ρ (n = 1,000 permutations); observed $\rho_B = 0.711$ marked. One-tailed $p = 0.094$. (b) Sub-model sensitivity: full 5-region $\rho = 0.711$; 4-region (drop V1) $\rho = 0.389$; 3-region (DMNX,GPi,V1) $\rho = 1.000$. (c) Initial-condition sensitivity: ρ vs seed fraction (0.001–0.05), showing robustness to seed size. (d) Post-hoc baselines (added in response to peer review): Model A grid-optimal $\rho = 1.000$ ($\beta_0 = 0.234$, $\gamma = 0.004$); Dijkstra graph-distance $\rho = 0.975$ (95% CI $[0.745, 1.000]$, $p = 0.015$). The Dijkstra result indicates the Allen connectivity topology alone nearly perfectly encodes the Braak caudo-rostral gradient. $n = 5$ regions; bootstrap n = 10,000; permutation n = 1,000.

2.8 Sensitivity analyses

Dropping V1 reduced Model B ρ to 0.389 (CI $[-1.000, 1.000]$; Figure 6b); varying seed fraction (0.001–0.05) did not alter rank-order (Figure 6c); and the permutation null (n = 1,000) yielded mean $\rho = -0.019$ (95% CI −0.921 to 0.947; one-tailed $p = 0.094$ for Model B; Figure 6a). The 3-region sub-model (DMNX, GPi, V1) achieved $\rho = 1.000$ by construction (perfectly monotone with 3 Braak-distinct ranks), uninformative for model discrimination.

3 Discussion

The Dijkstra graph-distance analysis ($\rho = 0.975$, 95% CI $[0.745, 1.000]$, $p = 0.015$) and Model A's independently optimised $\rho = 1.000$ together reveal that the Braak staging rank-order across these five human brain regions is essentially encoded in the topological structure of the Allen connectivity matrix, without requiring SIR epidemic dynamics. The pre-registered SNCA-expression-weighted model (Model B) failed the formal H1 criterion ($\rho = 0.711$, 95% CI spanning zero), and every secondary hypothesis (H2–H4) was also not supported. These results demonstrate the SPBF as an operational benchmarking protocol, and they provide negative evidence — to our knowledge among the first at human cell-type resolution — that SNCA-expression susceptibility weighting is insufficient to improve over a pure-connectivity SIR model for Braak staging.

Interpretation: connectome architecture as the dominant predictor. The numerical superiority of Model A over Model B ($\Delta\rho = -0.207$, favouring A at shared parameters; $\rho_{A,\text{opt}} = 1.000$ vs. $\rho_B = 0.711$ at independent optima) replicates and extends the finding of Henderson et al.[6] and Zheng et al.[7] that connectome structure is a strong predictor of α-syn spread order. Our result goes further in two respects. First, when susceptibility weights are derived from human snRNA-seq SNCA expression rather than vulnerability gradients fitted to mouse pathology data, those weights do not add predictive value beyond connectivity. This may reflect genuine biology — the SNCA expression gradient across brain regions is less predictive than axonal connectivity per se in the human brain — or a methodological limitation: raw SNCA count normalisation across heterogeneous brain regions may not capture functional vulnerability. The z-score normalisation sensitivity ($\rho = 0.803$ vs. $\rho = 0.711$ under min-max normalisation) and the possibility that post-mortem SNCA expression reflects disease-state changes (compensatory regulation, selective cell-type depletion, or aggregate-induced dysregulation) rather than pre-disease vulnerability propensity both support this interpretation. Second, the Dijkstra analysis reveals that even static graph topology — without ODE dynamics — recovers the Braak caudo-rostral gradient with $\rho = 0.975$. This means Model A's near-perfect staging recovery likely reflects that the Allen atlas connectivity topology is itself nearly isomorphic to the Braak anatomy, rather than mechanistically capturing propagation dynamics.

Relation to prior work and the species-translation problem. Cornblath et al. modelled tau spread and demonstrated that such models can recapitulate staging order[8]; the analogous α-syn problem at human cell-type resolution remains open. Henderson et al. found that both connectivity and selective vulnerability were necessary in mouse data[6]; Zheng et al. found a synergistic interaction[7]. Our result diverges toward connectivity dominance, and three mechanistic differences may explain this. First, Henderson and Zheng estimated vulnerability from post-hoc dopaminergic pathology burden in injected mice — a measure calibrated to the predicted outcome; human snRNA-seq SNCA expression is a pre-disease transcriptomic proxy that may not encode vulnerability propensity, particularly since SNCA is broadly expressed across cortical and subcortical cell types and raw expression normalised over heterogeneous populations compresses the biologically relevant gradient. Second, our model operates at $R_0 \approx \beta_0^*/\gamma^* = 0.010/0.023 \approx 0.43 < 1$, a sub-epidemic regime in which t_{peak} measures topological graph proximity rather than true epidemic spread; by contrast, Henderson et al. and Zheng et al. operated at $R_0 > 1$, where susceptibility weighting amplifies regional differences beyond the connectivity baseline. Third, our five atlas regions span a wider anatomical range than typical mouse injection experiments, inflating the connectivity contrast relative to SNCA. The critical finding that Dijkstra topology alone explains $\rho = 0.975$ suggests that future SIR-based Braak recovery tests must partial out the graph-distance confound before attributing staging recovery to epidemic dynamics.

Limitations. Six limitations qualify the conclusions. First, $n = 5$ regions yields extremely wide CIs; $\Delta\rho(\text{B} - \text{A})$ at shared parameters spans $[-1.304, 0.913]$ with $p_{\text{directional}} = 0.680$ — statistically uninformative about which model is superior; the post-hoc independent optimisation (Model A $\rho = 1.000 >$ Model B $\rho = 0.711$) narrows this conclusion but remains unregistered. Second, Model A was independently grid-optimised post-hoc ($\beta_0 = 0.234$, $\gamma = 0.004$; $\rho = 1.000$); while this resolves the asymmetric-optimisation concern, the post-hoc nature means the $\rho = 1.000$ result should be treated as an exploratory sensitivity check rather than a pre-registered finding. Furthermore, grid-searching 400 (β_0, γ) pairs on a 5-point ranking problem ($5! = 120$ possible orderings) risks trivially discovering a perfect order by parameter search alone, independent of biological signal; no permutation p-value was computed for the grid-optimal result, so $\rho_{A,\text{opt}} = 1.000$ cannot be interpreted as confirming mechanistic accuracy. Third, at $\beta_0^* = 0.010$ the pre-registered Model B operates in a sub-epidemic regime ($R_0 \approx 0.43 < 1$) where t_{peak} measures topological proximity rather than full epidemic dynamics; a mechanistically interpretable comparison requires $R_0 > 1$. Fourth, the connectivity matrix is a mouse-derived proxy; substituting

human DTI projections[11] would substantially change both Model A and the Dijkstra baseline, and the caudo-rostral gradient confound may differ with human-empirical connectivity. Fifth, the H3 cell-type comparison is confounded by annotation artefacts in the Fullard `derived_class2` column (`DMNX_Neu` and `GPI_Neu` labels in PFC cells), rendering the null overlap result uninterpretable as a biological finding. Sixth, the Dijkstra confound applies with equal force to all SIR-based Braak-staging analyses that use the Allen atlas; the finding that static topology ρ (0.975) approximates the best dynamic SIR ρ (1.000) suggests the ODE contributes minimal information beyond graph adjacency in this five-region system.

Next steps and falsifiable predictions. The Dijkstra and Model A grid-optimal results shift the central methodological challenge from "does SNCA weighting help?" to "can any SIR model be shown to add information beyond static graph topology?" Four falsifiable predictions follow. (1) *Human connectivity substitution*: if Dijkstra ρ using human DTI tractography (HCP data)[11] falls substantially below 0.975, the Allen mouse-proxy atlas is specifically responsible for the confound, not the Braak anatomy itself; this would revive SIR models as informative over topology for human data. Repeating the Dijkstra analysis on the directed (asymmetric) C matrix would further test whether the confound persists when edge directionality — which is central to the prion-like spread hypothesis — is respected. (2) *Dopaminergic-cell restriction*: restricting SNCA weighting to dopaminergic neurons only should increase Model B ρ if selective vulnerability — not aggregate PD-cell expression — is the relevant biological quantity. (3) *Expanded atlas power*: extending to 9–25 regions with distinct Braak stages would reduce CI width below 0.5, providing power to detect a 0.3-unit model-vs-topology difference. (4) $R_0 > 1$ *regime*: running all three models at β_0 values that produce $R_0 > 1$ would test whether SNCA weighting becomes necessary when full epidemic dynamics are engaged. The SPBF pre-registration protocol[12] defines acceptance criteria for each extension, enabling prospective model evaluation rather than post-hoc confirmation.

4 Methods

4.1 Datasets

Fullard 2024 snRNA-seq atlas. The primary parameterisation dataset is the Prashant et al. / Fullard 2024 multi-region single-nucleus RNA-seq atlas of Parkinson's disease brains[9], deposited in *Scientific Data* (doi:`10.1038/s41597-024-04117-y`). The atlas comprises 2,096,155 cells across five brain regions (DMNX, GPi, PFC, M1, V1) from PD and control donors. Cells were annotated by `derived_class2` (cell type) and `Diagnosis` (PD vs. control). Data were loaded from the `.h5ad` archives available via the Zenodo deposit linked from doi:`10.1038/s41597-024-04117-y` (`https://zenodo.org/records/10672963`), using `anndata` 0.10.9. Analysis was restricted to cells with `Diagnosis == "PD"`. The data are publicly available and may be downloaded directly from the linked Zenodo repository.

Allen Human Brain Connectivity. The 5×5 inter-regional connectivity matrix C was derived from literature-reported mouse Allen Brain Connectivity Atlas projection weights[13] as a proxy, following the approach of Henderson et al.[6]. Values represent normalised projection strengths between the five atlas regions; diagonal elements were set to zero and each row was renormalised to sum to 1. Exact values are provided in Table 1. **This matrix is a mouse-derived proxy and not human-empirical DTI data; all connectivity-dependent results should be interpreted accordingly.**

Table 1: Row-normalised Allen connectivity matrix C_{ij} (rows = source, columns = target; values rounded to 3 d.p.).

	DMNX	GPi	PFC	M1	V1
DMNX	0.000	0.793	0.129	0.052	0.026
GPi	0.273	0.000	0.555	0.142	0.030
PFC	0.061	0.329	0.000	0.549	0.061
M1	0.039	0.125	0.442	0.000	0.394
V1	0.026	0.078	0.203	0.693	0.000

Goralski 2024 LAMDA reference. H3 validation used the LAMDA spatial transcriptomics dataset from Goralski et al.[10] (doi:`10.1038/s41467-024-47027-8`), which characterises cell-type-specific Lewy body burden in anterior cingulate cortex. The top-3 Lewy-burdened cell types (Oligodendrocyte, PAX6, VIP) were extracted from the Zenodo deposit (`10.5281/zenodo.10729767`).

4.2 Pre-processing

SNCA expression was extracted from each region's h5ad file using gene identifier ENSG00000145335, restricted to PD-annotated cells. Per-region mean SNCA expression was computed across all cells in that region. Normalisation used min-max scaling across the five regions to produce susceptibility weights in $[0, 1]$. This normalisation is the pre-registered primary; z-score normalisation was evaluated in sensitivity analysis only. Cell-type fractions were computed as the proportion of each `derived_class2` label within each region's PD cells. Total cell counts per region (used as compartment sizes N_i for the SIR model) were: DMNX ≈ 303,942; GPi ≈ 435,221; PFC ≈ 503,414; M1 ≈ 425,651; V1 ≈ 428,927 (see Figure 2d; derived from Fullard 2024 h5ad data files).

4.3 SIR model construction and pre-registration

The SIR model follows the network diffusion modelling paradigm for brain disease propagation[5], extended from linear graph diffusion to nonlinear SIR compartmental dynamics. Three compartments per region are defined: Susceptible (S_i), Infected (I_i), and Removed (R_i), with $N_i = S_i + I_i + R_i$ fixed. Dynamics follow:

$$\frac{dS_i}{dt} = -\beta_i \, S_i \sum_j (C_{ij} \, I_j / N_j) \tag{1}$$

$$\frac{dI_i}{dt} = \beta_i \, S_i \sum_j (C_{ij} \, I_j / N_j) - \gamma \, I_i \tag{2}$$

$$\frac{dR_i}{dt} = \gamma \, I_i \tag{3}$$

where **Model A** sets $\beta_i = \beta_0$ for all regions (connectome-only, uniform susceptibility); **Model B** sets $\beta_i = \beta_0 \times \text{SNCA_norm}_i$ (SNCA-expression-weighted, primary); and **Model C** sets $C_{ij} = I(i == j)$ (cell-autonomous, no inter-regional spread, off-diagonal zeroed).

Initial conditions: $I_{\text{DMNX}}(0)/N_{\text{DMNX}} = 0.01$ (pre-registered seed fraction); $S_{\text{DMNX}}(0) = N_{\text{DMNX}} - I_{\text{DMNX}}(0)$; $I_i(0) = 0$ for $i \neq$ DMNX; $S_i(0) = N_i$. Simulation used `scipy.integrate.solve_ivp` with the RK45 solver, $t \in [0, 50]$, 1,000 time points, absolute tolerance 1×10^{-8}, relative tolerance 1×10^{-6}.

Pre-registered parameter grid: $\beta_0 \in \{0.01, \ldots, 1.0\}$ log-spaced in 20 steps; $\gamma \in \{0.001, \ldots, 0.1\}$ log-spaced in 20 steps (400 parameter pairs). For the primary analysis, best parameters were selected by maximising Model B Spearman ρ. Best-fit: $\beta_0^* = 0.010$, $\gamma^* = 0.023$.

Pre-registration hash: SHA-256 = `8b873a0375161e3995085a6e20091a0b2d7611d98e7b8cf10415f7b3fd42264e`. The pre-registration document is `001_plan/hypotheses.md`, locked at analysis initiation. Pre-registration follows Nosek et al.[12]

4.4 Statistical analysis

Primary metric (H1): Spearman rank correlation between predicted t_{peak} ($\arg\max I_i(t)$) and pre-registered Braak rank proxies (DMNX=1, GPi=3, PFC=5, M1=5, V1=6), using average tie-breaking. Bootstrap 95% CI: 10,000 resamples with replacement from the five (predicted_rank, Braak_rank) pairs; bootstrap Spearman ρ computed for each resample; 2.5th–97.5th percentile CI. H1 supported if $\rho \geq 0.7$ AND CI lower bound > 0.

Permutation null (H1): 1,000 random permutations of the Braak rank vector; Spearman ρ computed for each permutation. One-tailed permutation p = fraction of permutations with $\rho \geq$ observed ρ. Random seed: `numpy.random.seed(42)` (set in `code/metrics.py`).

H2 (SNCA necessity): Paired $\Delta\rho = \rho_B - \rho_A$; paired bootstrap CI using 10,000 resamples (same random indices for Models A and B). H2 supported if $\Delta\rho \geq 0.3$ AND paired CI lower bound > 0.

H3 (cingulate cell types): Fisher exact test of overlap between top-3 model-predicted cell types and top-3 LAMDA cell types (background = all shared cell type labels). Random seed for within-PFC sub-SIR: `numpy.random.seed(42)`.

H4 (vagal ablation): Rank displacement per region after DMNX→GPi edge ablation. H4 supported if max $|\Delta\text{rank}| > 1$.

H5 (model family): Comparison by ρ point estimate across Models A, B, C. Best variant = highest ρ. Three pairwise comparisons within H5 use Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.05/3 \approx 0.017$.

Multiple testing: H1 is the pre-registered primary hypothesis; H2–H5 are secondary exploratory tests reported at nominal $\alpha = 0.05$ one-tailed without family-wise correction across hypotheses, and should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory. H5's three pairwise comparisons are Bonferroni-corrected at $\alpha = 0.017$.

All statistical code is in `code/metrics.py`. Random seed used globally: 42.

4.5 Post-hoc peer-review sensitivity analyses (unregistered)

Two post-hoc analyses were added in response to peer review. These are unregistered and should be interpreted as sensitivity checks, not confirmatory tests.

Model A independent grid search. Model A was grid-searched over the same 20×20 log-spaced (β_0, γ) grid as the pre-registered primary, independently maximising Model A's Spearman ρ. Grid optimal: $\rho_{A,\text{opt}} = 1.000$ at ($\beta_0 = 0.234$, $\gamma = 0.004$). Code: `code/main.py` and `code/metrics.py` (flag `post_hoc_model_a_grid_opt`); results stored as `baselines.connectome_only_no_SNCA_weight.rho_grid_optimal` in `results.json`.

Dijkstra graph-distance baseline. Dijkstra shortest-path distances from DMNX to all five regions were computed on the undirected row-normalised C matrix using edge weights $1/C_{ij}$ for non-zero entries (`scipy.sparse.csgraph.dijkstra`). Spearman ρ between distances and Braak ranks was computed with 10,000-bootstrap 95% CI and 1,000-permutation one-tailed p (seed 42). Results stored as `baselines.graph_distance_dijkstra` in `results.json`. The weight convention ($1/C_{ij}$) ensures shorter graph distances correspond to stronger connections.

4.6 Software versions

Python 3.11.15 (conda environment). Key packages: `numpy` 1.26.4[14] (note: `numpy` 2.4.4 was also present in the environment but 1.26.4 was the active version for `anndata` compatibility), `scipy` 1.10.1[15], `pandas` 3.0.3[16], `matplotlib` 3.10.9[17], `seaborn` 0.13.2[18], `anndata` 0.10.9[19], `h5py` 3.16.0[20]. Packages present in the conda environment but not invoked in the analysis pipeline: `scanpy`, `statsmodels`, `scikit-learn`. `environment.lock.json` was generated via `conda env export --from-history` and includes exact package versions and build hashes for bit-for-bit environment reconstruction.

4.7 Model construction lockdown

Parameter grid and pre-registration were locked before execution. The pre-registration hash in `results.json` (`preregistration_sha256`: `8b873a0375161e3995085a6e20091a0b2d7611d98e7b8cf10415f7b3fd42264e`) provides tamper evidence. No post-hoc modifications were made to the pre-registered model or parameters; post-hoc analyses are explicitly labelled as unregistered.

4.8 Validation protocol

The SPBF validation protocol operates as follows: (1) parameterise three SIR variants from a human snRNA-seq atlas; (2) evaluate all variants on the same parameter grid; (3) score each variant against a pre-registered staging reference using Spearman ρ with bootstrap CI; (4) report all variants and their CIs irrespective of outcome. The protocol is independent of parameter fitting strategy and can be applied to any atlas with ≥ 3 regions annotated to distinct Braak stages.

4.9 Figure generation

Figures were generated by `code/figures/fig1_schematic.py` (Figure 1), `code/figures/fig2_parameterisation.py` (Figure 2), `code/figures/fig3_sir_results.py` (Figure 3), `code/figures/fig4_cingulate_h3.py` (Figure 4), `code/figures/fig5_ablation_modelcomp.py` (Figure 5), and `code/figures/fig6_sensitivity.py` (Figure 6). All figures were rendered with `matplotlib` 3.10.9 and `seaborn` 0.13.2 at 300 DPI. Source data for each figure traces to `019_execute/results.json`.

4.10 Data and code availability

All analysis code is available in `019_execute/code/` and can be reproduced by downloading the Fullard 2024 h5ad files from doi:`10.1038/s41597-024-04117-y` (Zenodo deposit:

`https://zenodo.org/records/10672963`) into a local directory, updating the `DATA_DIR` variable in `code/data_loader.py` to that directory, and executing `python code/main.py` from the `019_execute/` directory. All outputs are written to `019_execute/results.json`. The analysis environment is captured in `code/environment.lock.json`. Note: in `results.json`, `sensitivity.permutation_p_one_tailed` is stored as a string ("0.094"); the authoritative numeric value from `primary_model.p_value_vs_null_permutation` (0.094) is used throughout the paper. The pre-registration document will be deposited to a public repository (OSF or Zenodo) at submission alongside the SHA-256 hash.

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