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FoxO6 affects Plxna4-mediated neuronal migration during mouse cortical development

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The forkhead transcription factor FoxO6 is prominently expressed during development of the murine neocortex. However, its function in cortical development is as yet unknown. We now demonstrate that cortical development is altered in FoxO6+/− and FoxO6−/− mice, showing migrating neurons halted in the intermediate zone. Using a FoxO6-directed siRNA approach, we substantiate the requirement of FoxO6 for a correct radial migration in the developing neocortex. Subsequent genome-wide transcriptome analysis reveals altered expression of genes involved in cell adhesion, axon guidance, and gliogenesis upon silencing of FoxO6. We then show that FoxO6 binds to DA16-binding elements in the Plexin A4 (Plxna4) promoter region and affects Plxna4 expression. Finally, ectopic Plxna4 expression restores radial migration in FoxO6+/− and siRNA-mediated knockdown models. In conclusion, the presented data provide insights into the molecular mechanisms whereby transcriptional programs drive cortical development.

FoxO6 | cortex | development | radial migration | Plxna4

The forkhead box O family of transcription factors is known to be involved in a wide array of biological processes, including apoptosis, cellular survival, differentiation, and stress resistance. FoxOs are part of the conserved PI3K-AKT-FoxO signaling pathway, which has been shown to convey extracellular signals to intracellular transcriptional programs. Insulin and insulin-like growth factors (IGFs; e.g., Igf1) regulate FoxO transcriptional activity mainly via posttranslational modifications, resulting in the nuclear exclusion of the protein, thereby rendering it inactive (1–5). In humans, de novo mutations in genes involved in the PI3K/AKT pathway result in a wide array of cortical malformations, including cortical dysplasia, megalencephaly-polymicrogyria-polydactyly-hydrocephalus (MPPH), and megalencephaly-capillary malformation-polygyria syndrome (MCAP) (6, 7). Studying the downstream effectors of this pathway (e.g., FoxO proteins) provides in-depth insights into the molecular mechanisms underlying these cortical malformations.

Recent studies have shown that FoxOs are required for the coordinated regulation of postnatal neuronal stem cell (NSC) homeostasis, demonstrating a prominent role for FoxO3 in NSC proliferation and renewal (8–10). In a combined FoxO1,3,4-deficient mouse model, an initial increase in brain size was observed followed by a decline in the adult NSC pool. Furthermore, it was shown, both in vivo and in vitro, that the single-FoxO3-deficient animal results in a similar decline in NSC number (10). FoxO6 was shown to be required for the regulation, in the hippocampus, of a set of genes involved in synaptic function (11) and is essential in Pax1-mediated cellular polarity in the cerebellum (12), demonstrating the importance of this forkhead member in the mammalian brain.

Apart from the functions of FoxO6 in the postnatal hippocampus and cerebellum, FoxO6 is likely to play a role during the embryonic development of the cortex, judging from its specific temporal and spatial expression pattern (13). From embryonic day (E)12.5 during murine embryonic development, FoxO6 expression is found mainly in the hippocampus, cortex, and striatum (14). This pattern is conserved at later stages until birth, when expression of FoxO6 is mainly found in the hippocampus (14). Importantly, in early developmental stages, expression is observed in proliferating areas in the cortex whereas at later stages FoxO6 is also prominently expressed in the postmitotic cortical plate, suggesting different functions for FoxO6 during development.

During cortical development, neuroepithelial cells, located in the ventricular zone of the neural tube, will elongate at mouse E11 and assume a radial glial morphology. These radial glial cells divide asymmetrically to generate new radial glial cells and intermediate progenitor cells, destined to become postmitotic neurons (15, 16). Postmitotic cells undergo outward migration to form the upper layers of the cortical plate and eventually generate the six-layered adult neocortex. Although several factors, such as guidance molecules and cell-adhesion molecules (10, 17, 18), have been implicated in coordinating migration, molecular programming underlying these processes remains poorly understood.

In this study, we show that FoxO6 affects radial migration events during cortical development. Transcriptome analysis revealed that Plexin A4 (Plxna4) is regulated by FoxO6 in different mouse models. Moreover, we show that FoxO6 occupies DA16-binding sites present in the Plxna4 promoter and is able to regulate its transcription. Finally, in FoxO6 knockdown models, radial migration is restored by ectopic overexpression of Plxna4. These data provide insights into the molecular mechanisms whereby transcriptional programs influence cortical development.
data suggest that FoxO6 acts in a transcriptional program directed toward correct migration events during cortical development.

**Results**

**Global Cortical Markers Are Unchanged in FoxO6−/− Cortices.** During cortical development, FoxO6 has a regionalized expression pattern, mapping to different cortical subregions at different developmental stages, suggesting FoxO6 functions in multiple neuronal developmental processes (14). At early developmental stages (E12.5), FoxO6 is expressed in the proliferating ventricular zone (VZ) and subventricular zone (SVZ), suggesting FoxO6 may be involved in neuronal stem cell proliferation and/or stem cell maintenance, as has been suggested previously for other mammalian FoxOs (8–10). At E14.5, FoxO6 remains expressed in the VZ and SVZ and expression is now also observed in the outer layer of the cortical plate (CP) (14).

To substantiate these data and investigate expression at later time points of cortical development, we performed ISH experiments on WT brain material of E16.5 and E18 animals (Fig. 14). We show that at E16.5, throughout the rostral-to-caudal axis, FoxO6 was predominantly expressed in the developing ganglionic eminences, caudate putamen, and dorsal neocortex. Notably, FoxO6 was mostly detected in the developing hippocampus, as described previously (11, 14). At E18, FoxO6 expression was more strictly confined to the developing telencephalon, showing no expression in the thalamic and hypothalamic regions surrounding the third ventricle. In addition, FoxO6 is expressed throughout the VZ, SVZ, and CP. To investigate cortical development in the absence of FoxO6, we analyzed the distribution of global cortical markers in the cortices of FoxO6−/− and wild-type mice at E18 by immunohistochemistry. To do so, we visualized the apical and basal progenitor cells (respectively marked by Sox2 and comodermin (Thr2)) and quantified the positive cells for a fixed region, covering the VZ and SVZ, representing the amount as the percentage of total cells in that region. Our analysis revealed that the amount of multipotent progenitor cells, marked by Sox2, was not significantly different between the two genotypes (Fig. S1 A and C; n = 4 per condition). The amount of intermediate progenitor cells in the SVZ, marked by Thr2, was also unaffected in FoxO6−/− mice (Fig. S1 B and D; n = 4 per condition). To investigate whether the

![Image](https://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1609111113)

**Fig. 1.** FoxO6 is present in the developing cortex, and ablation does not lead to abnormalities in layering as shown by Ctip2 and Satb2 distribution. (A) During cortical development, FoxO6 is broadly expressed, showing expression in the proliferating (sub)ventricular zone and the postmitotic cortical plate at E16.5 and E18. Next to the cortical expression of FoxO6, expression is primarily observed in the nasal epithelium and the ganglionic eminences at E16.5 and E18. (B) Immunohistochemistry for FoxO6 reveals no clear differences in the amount of subcortical projection neurons in FoxO6−/− cortices. Cortices were counterstained with DAPI. (C) Immunohistochemistry for Satb2 reveals no clear differences in the amount of callosal-projecting pyramidal neurons in FoxO6−/− cortices. Satb2-expressing area was divided into two bins covering the upper layers and deep Satb2-expressing layers. Cortices were counterstained with DAPI. (D) Quantification of the number of DAPI-positive cells for the Ctip2 region in FoxO6−/− and FoxO6−/− cortices. (E) Quantification of the number of DAPI-positive cells for a fixed region covering the upper and deep Satb2-expressing layers in FoxO6−/− and FoxO6−/− cortices. (F) Quantification of the number of Ctip2-positive cells for a fixed region covering layers V and VI in FoxO6−/− and FoxO6−/− cortices. Data were normalized against the number of DAPI cells in that region. (G) Quantification of the number of Satb2-positive cells for a fixed region covering the upper and deep Satb2-expressing layers in FoxO6−/− and FoxO6−/− cortices. Data were normalized against the number of DAPI cells in that region. All quantifications were performed on n = 4 per condition. The error bars show the SEM. Two-tailed Student’s t test. c, caudate putamen; dn, dorsal neocortex; ge, ganglionic eminences; h, hippocampus; hy, hypothalamus; ne, nose epithelium; th, thalamus.
postmitotic regions of the developing cortex were affected by the loss of FoxO6 at E18, we performed immunohistochemistry for B cell leukemia/lymphoma 11B (Ctip2) and special AT-rich sequence binding protein 2 (satb2) to identify the subcortical and callosal projecting pyramidal neurons (Fig. 1 B and C). The amount of subcortical projection neurons, located in the deep layers V and VI (marked by Ctip2), was not significantly altered in FoxO6−/− cortices at E18 (Fig. 1 D and F; n = 4 per condition). We next divided the Satb2-positive cortical region into two bins covering the upper-layer Satb2-positive neurons and the deep-layer, still migrating, Satb2-positive neurons, revealing both populations to be not significantly changed (Fig. 1 E and G; n = 4 per condition). Supporting the results described above, the gross morphology of the developing layers was unaffected in FoxO6−/− cortices as shown by an unchanged thickness of the VZ/SVZ, intermediate zone (IZ), and CP at E18 (Fig. S1E; n = 3 per condition).

FoxO6−/− Mice Display Hampered Radial Migration During Cortical Development, Resulting in a Decreased Amount of Cut-Like Homeobox 1-Positive Cells. Because global cortical markers did not reveal significant changes in developing FoxO6−/− cortices, we set out to detect more subtle deviations in the developing cortex caused by FoxO6 ablation. Therefore, we introduced a GFP expression plasmid in E14.5 FoxO6−/− and FoxO6+/+ cortices by in utero electroporation, thereby tracing neurons born at the peak of neurogenesis. At E18, GFP-positive transfected cells in control cortices (Fig. 2 A) migrated outward, reaching the cortical plate. Interestingly, in FoxO6−/− cortices (Fig. 2 C), the proportion of GFP-positive cells reaching the cortical plate was decreased significantly. Quantification revealed that a majority of the GFP-positive cells (54.40%; SD ±0.53) in wild-type control cortices reached the cortical plate, whereas only 37.2% (SD ±6.1; P < 0.05) of these cells in FoxO6−/− cortices reached the cortical plate (Fig. 2 B; n = 4 per condition). In line with these findings, 42.83% (SD ±3.10) of GFP-positive cells in FoxO6−/− cortices are located in the IZ compared with 34.50% (SD ±0.35; P < 0.05) in wild-type littermate controls (Fig. 2 B). Furthermore, we observed a significantly increased ratio of GFP-labeled cells in the VZ of FoxO6−/− cortices (19.4%; SD ±3.8) compared with FoxO6+/+ controls (11%; SD ±0.35; P = 0.01) (Fig. 2 B), indicating the necessity of proper FoxO6 function for the migration of these neurons by in utero electroporation (IUE) at E14.5 with a GFP expression vector revealed an altered neuronal distribution of cortical cells in FoxO6−/− cortices compared with FoxO6+/+ cortices at E18. Magnifications are shown for the cortical plate, intermediate, and ventricular/subventricular zone. (A) Immunostaining for Cux1 showing altered neuronal distribution at E18 compared with FoxO6+/+ cortices. (B) Quantification of triplicate experiments as shown in A. Ratios between the ventricular zone, intermediate zone, and cortical plate are shown. (C) Immunostaining for Cux1 in FoxO6−/− cortices compared with FoxO6+/+ cortices. (D) Quantification of the number of Cux1-positive cells for a fixed region covering layers II–IV in FoxO6+/+ and FoxO6−/− cortices. Data were normalized against the number of DAPI cells in that region. (E) Cux1-positive cells by in utero electroporation with siFoxO6-1 at E14.5 and cotransfected with a GFP expression vector display altered neuronal distribution at E18 compared with siScrambled (control) electroporated cortices. Magnifications are shown for the cortical plate, intermediate zone, and ventricular/subventricular zone. (F) Quantification of triplicate experiments as shown in E. Ratios between the ventricular zone, intermediate zone, and cortical plate are shown. The error bars show the SD. Two-tailed Student t test; * P < 0.05 (Bonferroni-corrected significance level in B and F).

Fig. 2. FoxO6−/− mice display hampered radial migration during cortical development, which is exemplified by the altered presence of Cux1-positive callosal projection neurons. (A) Tracing newborn neurons by in utero electroporation (IUE) at E14.5 with a GFP expression vector revealed an altered neuronal distribution of cortical cells in FoxO6−/− cortices compared with FoxO6+/+ cortices at E18. Magnifications are shown for the cortical plate, intermediate zone, and ventricular/subventricular zone. (B) Quantification of triplicate experiments as shown in A. Ratios between the ventricular zone, intermediate zone, and cortical plate are shown. (C) Immunostaining for Cux1 in FoxO6−/− cortices compared with FoxO6+/+ cortices. (D) Quantification of the number of Cux1-positive cells for a fixed region covering layers II–IV in FoxO6+/+ and FoxO6−/− cortices. Data were normalized against the number of DAPI cells in that region. (E) Cux1-positive cells by in utero electroporation with siFoxO6-1 at E14.5 and cotransfected with a GFP expression vector display altered neuronal distribution at E18 compared with siScrambled (control) electroporated cortices. Magnifications are shown for the cortical plate, intermediate zone, and ventricular/subventricular zone. (F) Quantification of triplicate experiments as shown in E. Ratios between the ventricular zone, intermediate zone, and cortical plate are shown. The error bars show the SD. Two-tailed Student t test; * P < 0.05 (Bonferroni-corrected significance level in B and F).

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developing neurons. Although FoxO6s have been implicated to regulate cell polarity in the cerebellum (12), magnifications of the different cortical bins revealed that GFP-labeled cells, ablated for FoxO6, display a normal bipolar morphology (Fig. 2A, Right), which makes polarity changes unlikely to be responsible for the observed phenotype. These data, together with the observation that global cortical markers are unaltered in FoxO6−/− cortices, suggest that only a relatively small proportion of cells born at E14.5 is affected by the loss of FoxO6. In line with this, we analyzed the amount of cut-like homeobox 1 (Cux1)-positive cells in postnatal day (P)28 FoxO6++/+ and FoxO6−/− cortices (Fig. 2C and D). As shown, the amount of Cux1-positive cells in the upper layers of the FoxO6−/− cortex is decreased significantly (12%; P < 0.05; n = 3 per condition), indicating that ablation of FoxO6 influences a proportion of cortical neurons born at E14.5.

siRNA-Mediated Down-Regulation of FoxO6 Expression in the Embryonic Cortex Phenocopies the Radial Migration Defect Observed in FoxO6−/− Mice. To substantiate the cell-autonomous role of FoxO6 in cortical migration, we followed an acute knockdown strategy in which FoxO6 expression in the embryonic cortex was down-regulated via utero electroporation of siRNAs specifically directed against FoxO6. Out of two different siRNAs directed against FoxO6, we used the most efficient one in these experiments (siFoxO6-1; Fig. S2). To monitor radial migration, we electroporated a GFP expression vector and analyzed these cortices at E18. Mimicking FoxO6−/− animals, a hampered radial migration was observed at E18 when cortices were electroporated with siFoxO6-1 at E14.5 (Fig. 2 E and F). At E18, 3.5 d post-electroporation, cortices electroporated with scrambled control siRNA showed 27% (SD ±2.5) of transfected cells located in the intermediate zone compared with 48% (SD ±1.1; P < 0.001) in cortices down-regulated for FoxO6. Furthermore, only 35.2% (SD ±1.4) of the transfected cells in cortices electroporated with siFoxO6-1 reached the cortical plate, compared with 66.9% (SD ±1.2; P < 0.001) in controls (Fig. 2 E and F). Furthermore, we observed an increased ratio of GFP-labeled cells in the ventricular and subventricular zones in cortices down-regulated for FoxO6 (16.2% SD ±6.6) compared with control cortices (5.7%; SD ±2.2; P < 0.05). Taken together, the phenotype as observed in FoxO6−/− electroporated cortices resembles the FoxO6 siRNA-mediated knockdown phenotype. To elaborate upon the specificity of the siRNA, we introduced the siRNA targeting FoxO6 in FoxO6−/− cortices. As expected, in these cortices, the distribution of the GFP-labeled transfusions was unaltered (Fig. S5). In addition, we excluded the possibility that part of FoxO6 knockdown phenotype is due to off-target effects, we performed similar in utero electroporation experiments but now using a different siRNA directed against FoxO6 (siFoxO6-2) targeting a different part of the FoxO6 mRNA. Importantly, cortices electroporated with siFoxO6-2 showed an identical phenotype as cortices electroporated with siFoxO6-1 (Fig. S4), indicating that the phenotype observed is due to the down-regulation of FoxO6. Taken together, siRNA-mediated knockdown of FoxO6 in the developing cortex starting at E14.5 results in hampered radial migration similar to the effects observed in the full FoxO6 knockout.

FoxO6 Knockdown Results in Altered Expression of Genes Involved in Cell Adhesion, Axon Guidance, and Gliogenesis. To gain insight into the acute molecular mechanisms governing FoxO6-mediated cortical radial migration, genome-wide transcriptome analysis was performed. To this end, we specifically silenced FoxO6 expression in the cortex at E14.5 by utero electroporation of siFoxO6-1 together with a GFP expression plasmid. GFP-positive cells were FACsorted at E16.5, which is at the peak of radial migration and neuron genesis, followed by RNA isolation (Fig. 3A). We used two different siRNAs targeting FoxO6 (siFoxO6-1 and siFoxO6-2) and independently compared the results with a control siRNA (siScrambled, common reference) to minimize off-target effects and to select the most significant genes regulated by FoxO6 activity (Table S1). For each condition at least three cortices were pooled (randomized over litters) to minimize the possibility of finding initial differences due to the electroporation procedure itself or due to between-nest variation. In total, 12 cortices were used, whereby for each biological replicate 3 cortices were pooled, generating a total of 4 replicates. Electroporated cortices from different litters were pooled to minimize effects due to electroporation and litter differences. To investigate whether the different siRNAs and the separate in utero electroporations provided similar data, we performed a correlation analysis on the false discovery rate (FDR)-corrected values (FDR cutoff 0.1). The correlation coefficient (R) was at least 0.85 (siFoxO6-2, R = 0.85, P < 0.01; siFoxO6-1, R = 0.89, P < 0.001), indicating that the gene expression profile as a result of the FoxO6 knockdown by the two different siRNAs is highly comparable (Fig. 4B). Subsequently, we performed a Gene Ontology enrichment analysis on the separate datasets, showing that similar processes are highly enriched (Fig. 3C). The results from siFoxO6-2 (n = 3) and siFoxO6-1 (n = 3) and control siRNA (common reference) (n = 9) were used in a three-way comparison, thereby generating two independent datasets that contained ±200 and ±300 FoxO6-regulated genes (P < 0.05 cutoff) (FDR) (Fig. 3D). Overlap of these two restricted datasets (P < 0.05, for separate list selection) yielded a list of 24 regulated genes (Fig. 3D). We confirmed the transcription modulation of several genes in independently electroporated and FACTsorted cortices using quantitative (q)PCR [Fig. S2; LIM homeobox transcription factor 1 alpha (Lmxa1) was used as an unaltered reference], thereby confirming the validity of the transcriptome analysis.

FoxO6 Affects Radial Cortical Migration in a Plxna4-Dependent Manner. One of the identified FoxO6-regulated genes, Plxna4 (Fig. 3D), is known to be required for proper radial migration of newborn neurons in the developing cortex. Plxna4 plays a part in the Semaphorin signaling cascade, which is disrupted upon Plxna4 ablation, resulting in an impaired radial migration of cortical neurons (20). Importantly, the observed defect found in FoxO6−/− cortices, with siRNA silenced in Plxna4−/− newborn neurons in the developing cortex, phenocopies the defect observed when rat embryonic cortices are electroporated with siRNA specifically directed against Plxna4 (20). To further explore the possibility that the correct radial migration of neurons in the developing cortex is influenced by a FoxO6-mediated regulation of Plxna4, we first analyzed the spatial and temporal expression profile of Plxna4 by performing in situ hybridization of E16.5 and E18 cortices (Fig. 4A). At E16.5, from rostral to caudal, Plxna4 is most prominently expressed in the superficial layers of the cortical plate and intermediate zone with an apparent gradient from lateral to medial regions. At E18, expression is not restricted to the lateral regions of the developing cortex but is now prominently expressed in the entire outer layer of the cortical plate (Fig. 4A), resembling, in part, the expression domain of FoxO6 (Fig. 4B), as shown in Fig. 1. To substantiate the possible functional interaction of Plxna4, FoxO6, and cortical migration, we designed an in utero electroporation experiment in which we overexpress Plxna4 in FoxO6-deficient animals.

As demonstrated earlier, in FoxO6−/− cortices, radial migration is altered (Fig. 2A and B), showing GFP-labeled cells primarily in the IZ of the developing cortex. To investigate whether Plxna4 is related to the disrupted radial migration in FoxO6−/− animals, we expressed Plxna4 in these cortices at E14.5 and analyzed the distribution of GFP-labeled cells at E18. Our results show that in FoxO6−/− cortices, ectopic expression of Plxna4 was insufficient to restore normal radial migration (Fig. 4 C and D). To investigate whether expression of Plxna4 is altered in full FoxO6 mutant cortices similar to neurons silenced for FoxO6 (Fig. 3D), we introduced a GFP expression plasmid at E14.5 in cortices and FACTsorted the resulting GFP-labeled cells from FoxO6−/−, FoxO6−/−, and FoxO6−/− cortices at E16.5, followed by qPCR for Plxna4. We did not observe a significant difference in the expression of Plxna4 in FoxO6−/− and FoxO6−/− cortices. However, we did detect a significant reduction of Plxna4 in FoxO6−/− cortices (Fig. 5E; P < 0.05). This indicates that full FoxO6 knockout
animals, which lack FoxO6 from the beginning, have compensated for this loss of functionality, suggesting that the migration defect is not caused by limiting levels of \textit{Plxna4} in FoxO6\(^{-/-}\) animals. However, in developing cortices that do contain FoxO6, but in limiting levels, a reduction of \textit{Plxna4} is observed, which would suggest that in such animals \textit{Plxna4} overexpression might influence the radial migration events. To investigate this further, we performed a rescue experiment in FoxO6\(^{+/-}\) cortices. To this end, we coelectroporated E14.5 cortices with expression plasmids for GFP and \textit{Plxna4} or an empty vector (EV) control (Fig. 4 \textit{E} and \textit{F}). Importantly, overexpression of \textit{Plxna4} in FoxO6\(^{+/-}\) cortices significantly increased the amount of GFP-positive cells in the CP (\(P < 0.05\)).

To further substantiate the role of FoxO6 in modulating \textit{Plxna4} expression, we performed similar rescue experiments in cortices silenced for FoxO6 expression via siRNA-mediated knockdown. To this end, we coelectroporated E14.5 cortices with siFoxO6-1 and an expression vector for \textit{Plxna4} or an EV control. We hypothesized that \textit{Plxna4} is able to, at least partly, rescue radial migration in cells deficient for FoxO6, resulting in restored radial migration of transfected cells (Fig. 5A). The overexpression of \textit{Plxna4} was confirmed by immunohistochemistry (Fig. S7). Confirming earlier results, cortices electroporated with siFoxO6-1 and EV control (\(n = 4\)) showed 18.8\% (SD \(\pm 1.2\)) of transfected cells located in the ventricular zone compared with 14.0\% (SD \(\pm 0.36\); \(P < 0.001\)) in cortices coelectroporated with siFoxO6-1 and the \textit{Plxna4} expression vector (Fig. 5 \textit{B} and \textit{C}; \(n = 4\)). Furthermore, only 26.6\% (SD \(\pm 2.4\)) of the transfected cells in cortices electroporated with \textit{Plxna4} were located in the IZ compared with 43.5\% (SD \(\pm 1.7\); \(P < 0.001\)) in EV controls. Finally, 59.4\% (SD \(\pm 4.4\)) of the GFP-labeled cells reached the cortical plate when coelectroporated with \textit{Plxna4} compared with 37.7\% (SD \(\pm 0.8\); \(P < 0.01\)) in EV controls (Fig. 5 \textit{B} and \textit{C}). In conclusion, our data suggest that cortices electroporated with siFoxO6-1 and a \textit{Plxna4} expression vector display restored migration of developing neurons toward the cortical plate compared with FoxO6 knockdown controls. To test the possibility that overexpression of \textit{Plxna4} results in improved migration of wild-type neurons by itself, wild-type E14.5 cortices were transfected with \textit{Plxna4} or EV control plasmids. Analysis of

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**Fig. 3.** Genome-wide transcriptional profiling of FoxO6 knockdown neurons. (A) A graphical representation of the methodology used. FoxO6 is downregulated in utero electroporation at E14.5 using two different siRNAs targeting FoxO6 expression. Brains are dissected and dissociated at E16.5. Cortices are coelectroporated with GFP to FACS sort the transfected cells followed by RNA isolation and microarray analysis. Three electroporated cortices were pooled for each \(N\) per condition to minimize the effects due to electroporation differences and between-litter differences. (B) Regulated genes by FoxO6 (FDR cutoff 0.1), identified as a result of the two different siRNAs, display a strong correlation indicating that in both datasets similar genes are represented, which are changed in a similar direction; siFoxO6-2, \(R = 0.85\); \(P < 0.01\); siFoxO6-1, \(R = 0.89\); \(P < 0.01\). (C) GO term analysis reveals that similar processes are regulated by FoxO6 knockdown through the use of siFoxO6-2 and siFoxO6-1. (D, Left) Graphical representation of the microarray analysis setup and resulting amount of regulated genes (243, siFoxO6-2; 140, siFoxO6-1) and the exact overlap (24 genes) in the \(P < 0.05\) FDR-restricted datasets. (D, Right) Heatmap of the 24 genes that are present in such an overlap, including FoxO6, ctx, cortex; FACS, fluorescence-activated cell sorting; FSC, forward scatter; GFP, green fluorescent protein; Iv, lateral ventricle.
these cortices at E16.5 and E18 did not show an enhanced migration phenotype (Fig. S8), indicating that the induction of *Plxna4* expression above normal levels does not alter radial migration in wild-type neurons. To compare all used genetic models, we chose to calculate the difference in percentage of the GFP cells in the CP and IZ because these two parameters are mainly changed upon FoxO6 modulation (Fig. 5 D and E). This representation clearly shows that the siRNA-mediated knockdown of FoxO6 results in a negative value, indicating that more cells reside in the IZ compared with the CP. A similar pattern is observed in FoxO6<sup>−/−</sup> animals. However, in FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> cortices, the amount of cells is higher in the CP compared with the IZ. This indicates that a mild phenotype is present in FoxO6<sup>−/−</sup> animals. Introduction of *Plxna4* increases the migration to the CP in the knockdown and FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> cortices in concordance with the lower *Plxna4* levels in both the knockdown and FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> cortices. Taken together, our data indicate that radial migration events, in the developing murine cortex, are influenced by FoxO6.

**FoxO6 Interacts with Specific *Daf-16*-Binding Elements Within the *Plxna4* Promoter, Regulating *Plxna4* Gene Expression.** The results as described above indicate that the cortical migration defect, as observed in FoxO6 knockdown models, is mediated by a decrease of *Plxna4* expression. To investigate whether *Plxna4* transcription is directly regulated by FoxO6 via interaction with four in silico identified Daf-16–binding elements (DBEs) (21) located within 10 kb up- and downstream of the mouse *Plxna4* promoter (Fig. 6A), we performed chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) analysis.

To this end, we performed two independent in vivo FoxO6 ChIP-qPCR experiments on E16.5 cortices. First, we compared the FoxO6 IP and the control IgG IP in FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> cortices. Using this approach, we measured the highest enrichment of FoxO6 at DBE4 (Fig. 6B; n = 2). We then performed a FoxO6 IP on E16.5 FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> and FoxO6<sup>−/−</sup> cortices. Within this experimental design, FoxO6<sup>+/−</sup> cortices served as the negative control. Here we observed an enrichment of FoxO6 on each DBE, showing the highest enrichment on the locus covering DBE4 (Fig. 6C; n = 3). We then asked whether binding of FoxO6 to DBEs located in the *Plxna4* promoter is able to regulate *Plxna4* transcription. To this end, we used part of the *Plxna4* promoter with and without confirmed FoxO6-binding elements and cloned this 5′ of a luciferase reporter (pGL3). In this approach, lucinescence (measured in relative light units; RLUs) is a readout for the activity of the cloned promoter regions. In these experiments, a positive control (pGL3-6xDBE) (5) showed a large increase in RLUs (FoxO6-GFP/GFP), confirming our approach (Fig. 6D). The pGL3-EV showed a 6.5-fold increase in luminescence (FoxO6-GFP/GFP) (Fig. 6D), suggesting that FoxO6 may regulate transcription in general, as has previously been suggested (22). Importantly, promoter elements containing the confirmed in vivo FoxO6-binding element (pGL3-DBE4) show a significant increase in RLUs (P < 0.01) (FoxO6-GFP/GFP) compared with the control (pGL3-EV).
Together, these data indicate that FoxO6 affects Plxna4 transcription through binding to the identified DBE located within the Plxna4 promoter.

It has been described that transcriptional activity of FoxO transcription factors is negatively regulated via insulin and insulin-like growth factors (3–5, 13). This would imply that treatment with insulin, or IGFs in general, would negatively regulate the RLUs activated via the Plxna4 DBE4 enhancer element, thereby resembling the FoxO6 DNA-binding mutant used in the ChIP experiment described above. To investigate this possibility, we repeated the reporter experiments as described above under conditions with and without serum-mediated repression of FoxO6 transcriptional activity. To this end, cells were grown in serum-free media and treated with 10% heat-inactivated FCS (repression of FoxO activity) or kept under serum-free conditions (3, 4, 13). Interestingly, luciferase levels significantly dropped to ~27% (Fig. 6D) in 3T3 cells grown under serum-free conditions. These results indicate that serum-mediated signaling can modulate DBE4-driven Plxna4 transcription.

Discussion

In this study, we established evidence that FoxO6, a forkhead transcription factor predominantly expressed during cortical development, affects radial migration. We show that in siRNA-mediated knockdown and in FoxO6−/− animals the level of FoxO6 expression is linked to the expression level of Plxna4, a critical component in cortical migration (20). However, in full FoxO6 knockouts, we were unable to rescue the observed migration phenotype, which was confirmed by the absence of a down-regulation of Plxna4. Our data suggest that, although the migration phenotype in FoxO6−/− animals resembles the migration phenotype in neurons conditionally silenced for FoxO6, the underlying molecular mechanisms differ. The cause could lie in the fact that FoxO6 expression in the KO is ablated in neural progenitors before E14.5, the time point of the in utero electroporation. This could affect the molecular signature of early progenitors expressing FoxO6 and as a consequence lead to cortical abnormalities as observed.

Our data demonstrate that in FoxO6−/− cortices a subpopulation of E14.5 neurons fail to localize to the correct position in the developing cortex. Although we did not observe a defect in global cortical markers, we did detect a significant difference in the number of Cux1-positive cells in the upper layers, which supports the notion that a small subgroup is affected by ablation of FoxO6.

The genome-wide transcriptome analysis performed in this study has identified 24 genes that were deregulated upon silencing of FoxO6. Next to Plxna4, the down-regulation of Pik3 catalytic subunit alpha (Pik3ca) was of particular interest. In humans, de novo mutations in core components of the PI3K/AKT pathway, such as Pik3ca, result in a wide array of cortical malformations, including cortical dysplasia, MPPH, and MCA (6, 7). These mutations generally lead to a gain of function and activation of the PI3K/AKT pathway, which, in turn, results in the phosphorylation of FoxOs, thereby rendering them inactive (23). Moreover, a subset of patients with mutations in Pik3CA suffers from autism or display autistic features, which may imply a role for FoxO6 in the development of autism (6).

Plxna4, the coreceptor for Plxna/NP1 receptors, has been known to be part of the Sem5/6 signaling pathway. The impaired radial migration as observed upon FoxO6 silencing resembles to a great extent the disrupted migration upon the in utero silencing of Plxna2 and Plxna4 (20, 24, 25). This is in line with our hypothesis that FoxO6 may influence radial migration through Plxna4 regulation in the developing cortex.

Studies investigating the role of FoxO transcription factors in mitotic regions of the adult mammalian cortex have illustrated the general importance of FoxO factors in maintaining the population of...
NSCs (8, 10). Studies in FoxO3-deficient mice have shown that adult NSC homeostasis is regulated by FoxO3, mainly via the regulation of genes involved in quiescence (10). In a combined FoxO1,3,4-deficient mouse model, a progressive decline in adult NSC numbers was observed, also showing deregulation of genes linked to human brain size and the control of cellular proliferation and differentiation (8). Therefore, it is plausible that in the absence of FoxO6 proliferation and NSCs, homeostasis is altered. The numbers of NSCs and intermediate progenitor cells (IPCs) were unchanged in FoxO6+/− and FoxO6−/− cortices (Fig. S1), suggesting that this effect is subtle and not likely to contribute to the hampered radial migration.

It is known that FoxO proteins are regulated by the PI3K/AKT signaling pathway. In the presence of insulin or IGFs, FoxO proteins are phosphorylated at specific amino acids (3), resulting in decreased DNA binding and shuttling to the cytoplasm (3–5, 13). It is noteworthy that these upstream repressors of FoxO activity are normally present in embryonic cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) (reviewed in ref. 26). Hypothetically, this hints toward a mechanism in which extrinsic factors, present in the embryonic CSF, regulate the transcriptional activity of FoxO proteins, thereby regulating corticogenesis via downstream target genes such as Plxna4.

In addition to the down-regulation of Plxna4, our results revealed an altered expression of a diverse set of genes via which FoxO6 potentially executes its functions during corticogenesis. Remarkably, several of these additional identified genes are known to be involved in the process of neuronal migration, including Dynclin1, a dynein motor protein, and Nrcam, a neuronal cell-adhesion protein associated with psychiatric disorders such as autism (27–29). The expression of Nfia, a family member of Nfis, which has been shown to be involved in regulating the rostral migratory stream of SVZ-derived neuroblasts (30), was, like Plxna4, significantly decreased upon siRNA-mediated knockdown of FoxO6.

The molecular basis of radial migration of cortical neurons is a well-studied process showing prominent roles for axon guidance (20, 31, 32), cell adhesion (33, 34), cell polarity (35, 36), and cytoskeleton remodeling (28, 37, 38). Remarkably, knowledge about transcriptional control of genes involved in radial migration is scarce. Transcription factors known to be important in radial migration include Brn1 and Brn2, regulating Cdks-mediated cortical lamina formation (39); Alb, controlling Mdga2-mediated cortical migration (40); Rps8, a zinc finger transcription factor, which negatively regulates Rho family GTPase 2 (Rnd2) (41); COUP-TFI, which also regulates Rnd2 during mid to late corticogenesis (42), and FoxP1, found to regulate morphogenesis of cortical cells, thereby also critical for neuronal migration (43). In this perspective, the study as presented here is important, as it identifies a player in the transcriptional control of neuronal migration during cortical development.

**Materials and Methods**

**Animals.** The C57BL/6J mouse line was used for in utero electroporations silencing FoxO6 expression and rescuing Plxna4 expression. Adult FoxO6 mutant animals (−/−) were backcrossed to the C57BL/6J line and used in heterozygous breeding generating FoxO6 wild-type (+/−) and mutant progeny (−/−). Embryos were collected at E14.5, E16.5, and E18.5 (E0.5 is defined as day of copulatory plug). Genotyping was performed by PCR analysis using the following primers: forward FoxO6-1, 5′-cagaggcaaggtgcttccgc-3′; reverse FoxO6-1, 5′-caggggaggaagcaagg-3′; and reverse FoxO6-2, 5′-ctaaagagctgctgaagcgc-3′. The FoxO6 wild-type allele produced a band of 275 bp, and the FoxO6−/− allele produced a band of 174 bp in a PCR. All procedures were according to and fully approved by the Dutch Ethical Committees for Animal Experimentation (University Medical Center Utrecht and University of Amsterdam).

**In Situ Hybridization.** In short, coronal brain sections (16-µm) were collected using a Leica CM3050 S cryostat. Sections were fixed in 4% (v/v) paraformaldehyde (PFA) dissolved in PBS and blocked by acetylation. Next, sections were prehybridized for 2 h in prehybridization solution (50% (v/v) deionized formamide, 5× SSC, 5× Denhardt’s solution, 250 µg/mL baker’s yeast tRNA, 500 µg/mL sonicated salmon sperm DNA). Hybridization was performed overnight at 68 °C with 400 ng probe per mL hybridization mix.
The probes used were as follows: FoxO6, base pairs 1514-2430 of mouse coding sequence (CDs) and 3′ UTR, and Plxn4a, base pairs 1976-3232 of mouse CDs. The slides were washed in 2× SSC at 68 °C by following 0.2× SSC at room temperature (RT). Slides were blocked in 10% (wt/vt) heat-inactivated (HI) FCS and incubated overnight at 4 °C with anti-DIG alkaline phosphatase, diluted 1:5,000 in TBS containing 1% HI FCS. Next, the slides were treated with nitro-blue tetrazolium/5-bromo-4-chloro-3′-indolyphosphate solution. Incubation took 4 to 16 h, depending on the probe. The color reaction was stopped in 10 mM Tris-HCl, 5 mM EDTA, and the slides were dehydrated with ethanol and embedded using Entellan.

**Immunohistochemistry.** E16.5 and E16.0 heads were fixed in 4% (wt/wt) PFA in PBS for 4 h and 8 h, respectively, followed by incubation in 30% (wt/vt) sucrose in PBS for at least 48 h. Coronal brain sections (16-μm) were collected using a Leica CM3050 S cryostat. Antigen retrieval was performed for several anti-bodies. In short, sections were incubated in 10 mM sodium citrate (pH 6.0) for 15 min at 90 °C. Sections were blocked with 4% (wt/vt) HI FCS in THZT (50 mM Tris, 500 mM NaCl, 0.5% Triton X-100, pH 7.6). Primary antibody was incubated overnight at 4 °C. Primary antibodies and dilutions were as follows: rabbit anti-GFP (1:1,000; ab290; Abcam), chicken anti-GFP (1:1,000; ab13970; Abcam), rabbit anti-Sox2 (1:1,000; ab97959; Abcam), rabbit anti-Tbr2 (1:1,000; ab23345; Abcam); rabbit anti-Ctip2 (1:1,000; ab28488; Abcam); mouse anti-Satb2 (1:1,000; ab51502; Abcam), rabbit anti-Cux1 (1:500; sc-13024; Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA), and Armenian hamster anti-Plxna4 (kindly provided by Dr. F. Suto, National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry, Tokyo). Secondary antibodies were incubated at room temperature for 2 h (Molecular Probes; goat anti-rabbit IgG Alexa Fluor 488; goat anti-rabbit IgG Alexa Fluor 594; goat anti-mouse IgG Alexa Fluor 594; goat anti Armenian hamster IgG Alexa Fluor 594). Sections were counterstained with DAPI and embedded in FluorSave. Fluorescent images were taken with a Leica microscope (DFC310 FX).

**Transfection and Western Blot.** To test the efficiency of two siRNAs targeting FoxO6, we transfected HEK293 cells, using Lipofectamine 2000, with a plasmid expressing a translational fusion of FoxO6 and GFP, a GFP expression plasmid, and either siCDS, siFoxO6-1, or siFoxO6-2. At day posttransfection, the cells were lysed directly in sample buffer [62.5 mM Tris HCl, 2% (wt/vt) SDS, 10% (vol/vol) glycerol, 50 mM DTT, 0.01% (wt/vt) bromophenol blue] and sonicated. Protein quantification was performed. The lysates were electrophoresed nine times (three times) in different salt washing buffers, and DNA beads were extensively washed with DNeasy PCR Clean-up Kits (QIAGEN). The slides were scanned on an Agilent scanner (G2565BA) at 100% laser power, 0.3% photomultiplier. Data were analyzed using ANOVA (R version 2.2.1; MAANOVA version 0.98-7; www.r-project.org). P values were determined by a permutation F2 test. Genes with P < 0.05 after family-wise error correction (or Benjamini–Hochberg correction/FDR control) were considered significantly changed. The data discussed in this publication have been deposited in the National Center for Biotechnology Information’s Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/) and are accessible through GEO Series accession no. GSE71954 (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE71954). Top hits from the array were validated with qPCR. Analysis was performed on a LightCycler 480 II (Roche) using a One Step SYBR Green Kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. Independent in utero electroporated samples were FAC-sorted, followed by RNA isolation. All GFP-labeled cortices were normalized to an 18S reference. Primers used for qPCR amplification were as follows: 18S (60 °C; forward 5′-aaacggctaccacatccaag-3′, reverse 5′-cctcaattgtacgttgta-3′); FoxO6 (60 °C; forward 5′-agaggtggctaccataag-3′, reverse 5′-ggcaagttggtccttcagc-3′); Plxn4a (60 °C; forward 5′-ggctgaaggaaacctgcga-3′, reverse 5′-ttttcaagttcttcagcagc-3′); Nfat2 (60 °C; forward 5′-ttttcaagttcttcagcagc-3′, reverse 5′-ttttcaagttcttcagcagc-3′); Nfat2 (60 °C; forward 5′-ttttcaagttcttcagcagc-3′, reverse 5′-ttttcaagttcttcagcagc-3′). Data indicate means with SD unless stated otherwise. Statistical analysis was performed using a Student’s t test (two-way, unpaired). The average width of the cortex was measured using ImageJ software. Positive DAPI counterstaining was used to identify the width of the indicated layers in E18 FoxO6+/− and FoxO6−/− brains. The width of the cortex was measured at three fixed locations per section and then averaged per section.

**In Utero Electroporation.** C57Bl/6 mice at 14 d of gestation were anesthetized by injecting a mixture of ketamine/detomidine/xylazine intraperitoneally. The uteruses of these mice were exposed and a mixture containing 2.5 μg FoxO6 mRNA-siRNA (siFoxO6-1 or siScrambled), 1 μg expression vector containing GFP and/or Plxn4a, and 0.01% Fast Green dissolved in 20 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8) was injected through pulled glass capillaries, using a microinjector, into one lateral ventricle of each embryo. We used custom-made siRNAs (Thermo Scientific) to silence FoxO6 (siFoxO6-2, 5′-NNAAUGCCAGUGGACGAC-3′; siFoxO6-1, 5′-NNCCAUGCGCUUAGGAGCU-3′) and a nontargeting siRNA (Thermo Scientific; D-001210-03-20). The expression vectors used were pcGAP-AFP 2424 (GFP) and pDnA3.1 (+) Plexin-A4 (kindly provided by R. J. Pasterkamp, Brain Center Rudolf Magnus, University Medical Center Utrecht). Next, electric pulses were generated by an ECM 830 Square Wave Electroporation System and applied to the cerebral wall at five repeats of 3 V for 50 ms with an interval of 950 ms. After the electroporation the uterus was placed back and the mouse was taken care of. Depending on the analysis, the embryos developed to stage E15.5 or stage E18 before they were killed.

**Microarray and qPCR Validation.** Embryos were electroporated at E14.5 with either siFoxO6-2 or siFoxO6-1, both targeting FoxO6 specifically or the control siScrambled. All cortices were cotransfected with GFP. At E16.5, embryos were harvested, and the cortex was isolated and dissociated using a papain kit according to the manufacturer’s protocol (Worthington Biochemical) followed by FACS Sorting. Sorted samples were used for RNA isolation using the phenol-chloroform extraction method. Electroporated cortices from different litters were pooled to minimize effects due to electroporation differences and nest differences. All RNA samples were analyzed using a 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies) to ensure the quality of the RNA. Microarray analysis was performed using four experimental samples (three cortices pooled) in utero electroporated with siFoxO6-1 and four experimental samples in utero electroporated with siFoxO6-2. These samples were compared with a reference pool of RNA derived from eight siScrambled electroporated cortices. For siRNA, two samples were labeled normal and two in a dye swap against the common reference, and hybridized on a mouse expression microarray. Agi- lent Mouse Whole Genome Gene Expression Microarray V1 (Agilent Technologies) sets were used for all hybridizations, in a 4 x 44 layout. Hybridized slides were scanned on an Agilent scanner (G2565BA) at 100% laser power, 30% photomultiplier. Data were analyzed using ANOVA (R version 2.2.1; MAANOVA version 0.98-7; www.r-project.org). P values were determined by a permutation F2 test. Genes with P < 0.05 after family-wise error correction (or Benjamini–Hochberg correction/FDR control) were considered significantly changed. The data discussed in this publication have been deposited in the National Center for Biotechnology Information’s Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/). Published online October 24, 2016 | E7095
reverse-cross-linked and treated with proteinase K. DNA was purified and used for qPCR analysis. qPCR primers are specified below. In vitro ChIP was performed similarly. In vivo mouse cell lines (3T3) were transfected with either pCDNA3.1 FoxO6-Myc or N1-FoxO6-GFP using Lipofectamine 2000 according to the manufacturer's protocol (Thermo Fisher Life Technologies). Cells were cross-linked using 1% PFA followed by sonication. The latter sonication procedure was optimized for each cell line to generate DNA fragments of 200 to 1,000 bp. Cross-linked samples were incubated overnight with either rabbit anti-Myc or rabbit anti-GFP and the rabbit IgG control followed by incubation with pre-blocked A goat-agarose beads. Beads were extensively washed in different salt washing buffers, and DNA-histone complexes were eluted using elution buffer (1% SDS, 0.1 M NaHCO3). Samples were reverse-cross-linked and treated with proteinase K. DNA was purified and used for qPCR analysis. In silico search for FoxO DBEs revealed four FoxO DBEs in the 10 kb surrounding the transcription start site (TSS) of PlxnA4. Primers used for qPCR amplification were as follows: DBE_plexina3_2.2kbupstream_TSS (50 °C): forward 5′-gaacatctctcaaatcaccac-3′, reverse 5′-tacatctcttctctccttca-3′, reverse 5′-gcacactaagggtaaggaa-3′; DBE_plexina4_8.6kbdownstream_TSS (60 °C): forward 5′-tacaatctctctgtggtt-3′, reverse 5′-acaccacccaattcaacac-3′; DBE_plexina4_8.3kbupstream_TSS (60 °C): forward 5′-cccttcattccccttgaggat-3′, reverse 5′-gcaggcatgcaagcttactt-3′; DBE_plexina4_10.4kbdownstream_TSS (60 °C): forward 5′-gcacccgcttcgccaagagtt-3′, reverse 5′-cccttcctctcgggaggt-3′; 6xGDE (60 °C): forward 5′-taagggcgggtcagccg-3′, reverse 5′-gcgcgtcactagcaagt-3′.

Luciferase Assay. A total of ~400 bp surrounding the DBEs was independently cloned into the pGLO3 promoter vector. 3T3 cells (neuronal cell lines) died when overexpressing FoxO6 were grown in 24-well plates and transfected with 2 μg plasmid DNA per well (N1-FoxO6-GFP or N1-GFP) and cotransfected with 0.2 μg pGL3 promoter vector and 0.02 μg CMV-Renilla using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen). Twenty-four hours after transfection, cells were serum-starved to activate FoxO6. After 8 h, cells were lysed and assayed for luciferase activities using a Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay (Promega; E1910) according to the manufacturer's protocol. All experiments were performed in triplicate. Data represent average values.

FACSorting. Freshly dissected cortices were dissociated using a papain dissociation system (Worthington Biochemical), and cells were sorted on a Cytopeia Influx or BD FACSARia III cell sorter. Sort gates were set on forward scatter versus side scatter (life cell gate), forward scatter versus pulse width (elimination of clumps), and forward scatter versus fluorescence channel 1 (528/38 filter; GFP fluorescence). Cells were sorted using a 100-μm nozzle at a pressure of 15 or 20 psi (BD FACSARia III) with an average speed of 5,000 cells per s and collected in Trizol-Ls reagent (Invitrogen).

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