Discovery of Bishomo(hetero)arylpiperazines as Novel Multifunctional Ligands Targeting Dopamine D₃ and Serotonin 5-HT_{1A} and 5-HT_{2A} Receptors

Stefania Butini,^{†,‡} Giuseppe Campiani,^{*,†,‡} Silvia Franceschini,^{†,‡} Francesco Trotta,^{†,‡} Vinod Kumar,^{†,‡} Egeria Guarino,^{†,‡} Giuseppe Borrelli,^{†,‡} Isabella Fiorini,^{†,‡} Ettore Novellino,^{†,§} Caterina Fattorusso,^{†,§} Marco Persico,^{†,§} Nausicaa Orteca,^{†,§} Karin Sandager-Nielsen,[⊥] Thomas Amos Jacobsen,[⊥] Kim Madsen,[⊥] Jorgen Scheel-Kruger,[⊥] and Sandra Gemma^{†,‡}

[†]European Research Centre for Drug Discovery and Development, Universitá di Siena, 53100 Siena, Italy, [‡]Dipartimento Farmaco Chimico Tecnologico, Universitá di Siena, Via Aldo Moro, 53100 Siena, Italy, [§]Dipartimento di Chimica delle Sostanze Naturali and Dipartimento di Chimica Farmaceutica e Tossicologica, Università di Napoli Federico II, Via D. Montesano 49, 80131 Napoli, Italy, and [⊥]NeuroSearch A/S, Pederstrupvej 93, Ballerup DK-2750, Denmark

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As a continuation of our efforts to develop innovative ligands for D_3 , 5-HT_{1A}, and 5-HT_{2A} receptors with low propensity to block hERG channels, we propose a series bishetero(homo)arylpiperazines **5a**-**m** as novel and potent multifunctional ligands characterized by low occupancy at D_2 and 5-HT_{2C} receptors.

Introduction

Schizophrenia is a chronic mental disorder that globally affects $\sim 1\%$ of the world population.¹ "Typical" antipsychotics (e.g., haloperidol), potent dopamine D_1 receptor ($D_1 R^a$) and D_2 receptor (D_2R) antagonists, are effective in the treatment of the positive symptoms of schizophrenia but fail to manage the negative symptoms and the cognitive impairment and induce side effects such as extrapyramidal symptoms (EPS) and hyperprolactinemia.² "Atypical" antipsychotics (e.g., clozapine (1) and olanzapine (2), Chart 1), characterized by a multireceptor affinity profile, are effective on therapyresistant schizophrenic patients³ although accompanied by a series of unwanted effects. Olanzapine may precipitate diabetes⁴ and increase appetite,⁵ and clozapine may induce agranulocytosis, while other antipsychotics (ziprasidone, risperidone, and quetiapine) may induce long QT syndrome (risk of malignant ventricular arrhythmia). Recently, aripiprazole (3, Chart 1), a potent D_2R ligand, ^{6,7} characterized by low risk of side effects, has been launched.8

The unmet clinical needs such as the treatment of refractory patients, poor treatment of negative symptoms, and cognitive dysfunction boosted us to exploit a novel paradigm^{9–13} for developing innovative antipsychotics based on a unique multireceptor affinity profile.¹⁴ Our pharmacological approach combines occupancy at dopamine D₃ receptor (D₃R), 5-HT_{2A} receptor (5-HT_{2A}R), and 5-HT_{1A} receptor (5-HT_{1A}R) with low affinity for D₂R (no liability of EPS at antipsychotic doses) and 5-HT_{2C} receptor (5-HT_{2C}R) (reducing the risk of obesity under

Chart 1. Reference and Title Compounds



chronic treatment). Our original design strategy¹⁴ was based on the hypothesis that dopamine/serotonin competitive ligands, although characterized by different structural scaffolds, are able to interact with similar clusters of key receptor residues by adopting multiple binding modes.^{9–14} We hypothesized that the flexible arylpiperazine skeleton could allow the proper orientation of the pharmacophoric moieties (i.e. the two aromatic rings, the protonated nitrogen, the H-bond donor/acceptor atom(s)) to settle into different dopamine/serotonin receptor sites. Structure–activity relationships (SARs) of the original arylpiperazines were associated (i) with the variation of the aromatic systems at the "head" and "tail" (Chart 1) of the structure, (ii) with the length of the methylene linker, and (iii) with

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^{*}To whom correspondence should be addressed. Phone: 0039-0577-234172. Fax: 0039-0577-234333. E-mail: campiani@unisi.it.

^{*a*} Abbreviations: D₁R, dopamine D₁ receptor; D₂R, dopamine D₂ receptor; D₃R, dopamine D₃ receptor; EPS, extrapyramidal symptoms; 5-HT_{2A}R, serotonin 5-HT_{2A} receptor; 5-HT_{1A}R, serotonin 5-HT₂, receptor; SARs, structure–activity relationships; hERG, human ether-a-go-go-related gene; PCP, phency-clidine; MAMP, methamphetamine; AUC, area under the curve; TEA, triethylamine.

Table 1. Binding Affinities for D₂, D₃, 5-HT_{1A}, 5-HT_{2A}, and 5-HT_{2C} Receptors $(K_i, nM)^a$ and hERG Channels $(K_i, \mu M)^b$ of Compounds **5a**–**m** and Reference Antipsychotics

Compd	Aryl/HetAr	Aryl/HetAr	${\rm D_2}^c$	D_3^c	$5-\mathrm{HT_{1A}}^c$	5-HT _{2A} ^c	$5-\mathrm{HT_{2C}}^{c}$	hERG ^c
5a	\bigcirc	$\widehat{\mathbb{Q}}$	>1000	1	3	31	>1000	8.0
5b	Me	Me	>1000	70	48	20	120	2.2
5c	OMe	OMe	>1000	27	8	28	303	2.4
5d	ō	C	>1000	11	16	98	504	0.3
5e			>1000	159	16	45	>1000	>10
5f			>1000	34	30	39	>1000	13
5g		Me	>1000	24	8	25	309	6.4
5h		Me	>1000	20	19	10	182	3.8
5 i			>1000	41	49	34	>1000	3.8
5j			>1000	44	2	10	150	8.7
5k	Me	Me	>1000	33	11	6	68	4.1
51			NT^d	NT^d	NT^d	NT^d	NT^d	0.9
5m	OMe	CI	>1000	4	1	7	92	1.2
1			210	319	160	10	4.8	17
2			20	39	610	4.0	4.1	36
3			0.8	3.3	5.6	8.7	22	1.02
4			263	4.5	11.9	15.3	206	0.93

^{*a*} Each value is the mean of three determinations, and all SD were within 10% of the mean. ^{*b*} Each value is the mean of two determinations, and all SD were within 10% of the mean. ^{*c*} Tests performed as in ref 14. ^{*d*} NT: not tested.

the replacement of the amide bond with an ether function.¹⁴ According to our binding mode hypothesis, we rationalized SARs on the basis of dopamine/serotonin receptor homology by using 3D receptor models. This approach allowed us to identify the key structural elements responsible for achieving the fine balancing of activity and selectivity toward the receptors of interest and led to the identification of innovative atypical antipsychotics.¹⁴ Furthermore, to improve the drugability of the novel antipsychotics, we directed our design strategy at limiting human ether-a-go-go-related gene (hERG) potassium channel inhibition by up to 1 μ M, thus minimizing the risk of long QT syndrome and cardiac side effects.

In an effort to identify new scaffolds for the development of multifunctional ligands for the same panel of receptors, we applied the lessons learned from our previous studies and we developed novel bishomo(hetero)arylpiperazines as flexible ligands for specific occupancy of D_3R , 5-HT_{1A}R, and 5-HT_{2A}R. The bishomo(hetero)arylpiperazines **5a**-**m** (Chart 1 and Table 1) described herein demonstrated the predicted receptor affinity profile, being potent and selective for D_3R , 5-HT_{1A}R, and 5-HT_{2A}R. Our design strategy also proved to be successful for reducing hERG occupancy. In fact, most compounds showed a low propensity to block hERG potassium channels.

Chemistry

For the synthesis of the bishomoarylpiperazines 5a-e (Scheme 1) 2 equiv of the correspondent arylpiperazines 6a-e were reacted with 1,6-dibromohexane in the presence of a base. Unsymmetrical bisarylpiperazines 5f-m were synthesized by a two-step synthesis. Bromo derivatives 7a-c were at first synthesized using an excess of the 1,6-dibromohexane (2 equiv) in the presence of the appropriate arylpiperazine (6a-c). Bromo derivatives 7a-c were then used as the alkylating agents of the appropriate arylpiperazine (6b,d,e, 10a,b) to afford 5f-m.

The noncommercially available arylpiperazines 10a,b were synthesized (Scheme 2) starting form *N*-Boc-piperazine (8) that was N-substituted with the appropriate heteroaryl bromide following a standard palladium catalyzed protocol.^{15,16} Deprotection of derivatives 9a,b by trifluoroacetic acid afforded 10a,b as trifluoroacetates.

Structure-Activity Relationships of Compounds 5a-m

Compounds 5a-m showed a receptor affinity profile similar to that of our original arylpiperazine series,¹⁴ being, on average, more selective for the desired panel of receptors (i.e., D₃R, 5HT_{1A}R, 5HT_{2A}R; Table 1). These results

Scheme 1^a



^{*a*} Reagents and conditions: (a) 1,6-dibromohexane (0.5 equiv), TEA, MeCN, 12 h, room temp; (b) 1,6-dibromohexane (2.0 equiv), TEA, MeCN, 12 h, room temp; (c) arylpiperazine (**6b,d,e, 10a,b**), TEA, MeCN, 12 h, room temp.

Scheme 2^a



^a Reagents and conditions: (a) 2-bromo-6-methylpyridine or 4-bromoquinoline, Pd₂(dba)₃, (±)-BINAP, NaO'Bu, toluene, 90 min, 70 °C;
(b) trifluoroacetic acid, dichloromethane, 1 h, room temp.

validated our design strategy and binding mode hypothesis. Indeed, our previous studies¹⁴ indicated that an intramolecular H-bond between the carbonyl oxygen and the protonatable nitrogen of **4** (and its analogues) stabilized a conformation that could fit the dopamine/serotonin receptor pharmacophore. Molecular modeling calculations performed on the bishomo(hetero)arylpiperazine scaffold also indicated that **5a**-**m** (Table 1) tend to adopt a similar conformation (Figure 1; Figure 1 SI and Table 1 SI of the Supporting Information).

Indeed, conformational search results pointed out that most of the low energy conformers (i.e., $\Delta E_{GM} \leq 5 \text{ kcal/mol}$) of 5a-m presented an intramolecular H-bond between their protonated and unprotonated aliphatic nitrogens (Figure 1 SI, Table 1 SI). At physiological pH, apparent estimated pK_a values of the new compounds (Table 2 SI) predicted a 50:50 equilibrium between the mono- and the diprotonated forms $(pK_{a1} \approx 8.2, pK_{a2} \approx 7.4, SD = \pm 0.40)$. In the case of **5i** and **5l**, this equilibrium involved the diprotonated and the triprotonated forms because the first protonation was estimated to occur on the 4-aminoquinoline moiety. However, taking into account the observed conformational behavior of 5a-m and the presence an intramolecular H-bond that engages one aliphatic nitrogen lone pair, water protonation of both aliphatic nitrogens was disfavored. Taken together, our results indicated that at physiological pH, the monoprotonated (diprotonated for 5i and 5l) forms of 5a-m tend to prevail because of the internal proton exchange between the two



Figure 1. (A) Transversal view of serotonin and dopamine 3D receptor models. D_2R (yellow), D_3R (white), 5- $HT_{2A}R$ (cyan), and 5- $HT_{2C}R$ (green), and 5- $HT_{1A}R$ (magenta) are superimposed by Ca atoms. Key residues on TM3, TM5, TM6, and TM7 are displayed. Amino acids involved in subtype selectivity are highlighted by white circles. Ser residues on TM5 are labeled. (B) Transversal view of **5a** (green) and **4** (magenta), superimposed by fitting their pharmacophoric moieties (i.e., "head" ring centroid, protonated piperazine nitrogen hydrogen, H-bond donor group, "tail" ring centroid). The hypothesized interactions with TM3, TM5, TM6, and TM7 receptor helices are indicated.

(equally basic) aliphatic nitrogens. As a consequence, 5a-mwere predicted to adopt a conformation able to fulfill the dopamine/serotonin pharmacophore reproducing the binding mode of 4^{14} (Figure 1, Figure 1 SI, Table 1 SI), placing (i) the protonated N in contact with the Asp residue on TM3, (ii) the two aromatic rings on the aromatic pockets on TM6 and TM7 (or TM4), and (iii) the H-bond donor groups close to the donor/ acceptor residues on TM5 and (in D_3R and $5HT_{1A}R$) on TM7.14 Accordingly, the bishomo(hetero)arylpiperazine scaffold was designed to support our hypothesis of multiple binding modes related to the pseudosymmetry of the receptor binding sites. Resulting affinity profiles of 5a-m (Table 1) proved this hypothesis, with 5a (bearing two unsubstituted phenyl groups) being one of the most potent and selective ligands of the series. In agreement with our previous SARs,¹⁴ the low occupancy at D_2R and $5HT_{2C}R$ (5a, Table 1) could be related to (i) the constraint due to the H-bond acceptor groups hypothesized to interact with TM5 in a bulky piperazine ring (Figure 1), (ii) the increased length of the alkyl chain, and (iii) the consequent optimal distance between the aromatic ring binding to the relevant aromatic pocket on TM6 and the protonated N binding to TM3 (Table 3 SI: Y-N2 distance). Because of the higher tolerance of D₃R, 5HT_{1A}R, and $5HT_{2A}R$ to the mentioned structural modifications,¹⁴ 5a maintained the desired affinity profile on these receptors.

Since 5a was found to be a weak hERG potassium channel ligand (hERG $K_i = 8.0 \ \mu M$, Table 1), this indicated¹⁴ that hERG affinity was strongly influenced by the dipole of the phenyl ring at the "tail". In our original series we observed that a meta-substituent on the phenyl ring at the "tail" (Chart 1) of the arylpiperazine moiety, such as in 4, led to an optimal balance in receptor affinity profile.¹⁴ Consequently, different substituents at the meta position of the phenyl rings were investigated (5b-d,h,j-m, Table 1). Electron rich nitrogen containing aromatic rings (5e-g,i-l, Table 1) were also introduced to further reduce hERG channel interaction, according to the observation that electron-withdrawing atoms at the "tail" of arylpiperazines strongly increased hERG affinity.¹⁴ The tight correlation between the electron density at the aromatic rings and hERG affinity was confirmed in the new series (5d > 5m > 5b and 5e, $\mathbf{f} > 5\mathbf{a}$; Table 1). Furthermore, comparing hERG occupancy in the subseries $5\mathbf{a} - \mathbf{c}$ ($5\mathbf{b} \sim 5\mathbf{c} > 5\mathbf{a}$), $5\mathbf{f}, \mathbf{g}, \mathbf{i}$ ($5\mathbf{i} > 5\mathbf{g} > 5\mathbf{f}$), and 5j-1 (5l > 5k > 5j), we observed that, besides electronic effects, hERG interaction was dependent on the steric hindrance at the meta position. With respect to receptor interaction, the methyl groups of **5b** reduced affinity for D_3R and 5-HT_{1A}R while increasing affinity for 5-HT_{2A}R and 5-HT_{2C}R (5b vs 5a). Analogous to what occurred at the "tail" of our original arylpiperazines, the replacement of the methyl groups of **5b** with chlorine atoms (**5d**) improved potency at D_3R , worsening affinity for 5-HT_{2A}R. Introduction of methoxy groups (5c) was tolerated at the three receptors of interest, while the introduction of two 2-pyridine systems was detrimental for D_3R affinity (5e). Interestingly, in the heterodimer series (5f-m), the combination of the phenylpiperazine functionality with the 2-pyridinylpiperazine (5f), together with 5a, provided the best affinity profile of the series. A bulky 6-methyl substituent at the pyridine (5g) provided a compound equally active at D3R and 5-HT2AR with respect to 5f while increasing occupancy at 5-HT_{1A}R and 5-HT_{2C}R. Exploration of other combinations (5h and 5i) did not improve the original profile of 5a and 5f. Introduction of a bicyclic system as in 5i was well tolerated by the three receptors of interest, as well as the combination of the *m*-tolylpiperazine with different pyridinylpiperazines (5k and 5j). Occupancy of 5HT_{2C}R increased with the introduction of a methyl substituent on the phenyl and the pyridine ring (5a vs 5b, 5f vs 5g, 5j vs 5k), and 5k was the most potent compound of the series. As discussed above, when the *m*-tolylpiperazine was combined with the bulky 4-quinolylpiperazine (protonated at physiological pH, Table 2 SI), hERG affinity was highly increased (51). When a *m*-methoxyphenylpiperazine was combined with a 3-chlorophenylpiperazine system (5m), an excellent ligand for D₃R, 5-HT_{1A}R, and 5-HT_{2A}R was obtained. These SARs proved that the bisheteroarylpiperazine represents a new scaffold for selective interaction with D₃R, 5-HT_{1A}R, and 5-HT_{2A}R. Except for 5d, the other members of the series showed micromolar affinity for hERG potassium channels with 5f that combines the desired binding profile to the lowest occupancy at hERG (Table 1).

The intriguing multireceptor affinity profile of **5a**,e-**h**,**k**,**j** prompted us to further explore the antipsychotic potential by means of standard animal models (Table 3 SI). In parallel to these studies preliminary pharmacokinetic parameters were also evaluated (Table 2 and Figure 2 SI).

Preliminary tests performed to evaluate the ability of our compounds to inhibit spontaneous exploratory locomotor activity indicated that, with the exception of **5**_j (Table 3 SI),

 Table 2.
 Pharmacokinetic Results for Compounds 5a,e-h,k and 4 after

 Administration of 3 mg/kg (ip) in Mouse

	AUC^a		C_{\max}	
compd	$(h \cdot ng \cdot mL^{-1})$	$T_{\max}(\mathbf{h})$	$(ng \cdot mL^{-1})$	$T_{1/2}$ (h)
5a	198	0.5	71	NA
5e	84	1.0	26	NA
$5f^b$	58	1.0	50	NA
5g	362	0.3	121.3	2.5
5h	147	0.5	41	NA
5k	243	2.0	58	NA
4	128	0.5	155	NA

^{*a*} Area under the curve. ^{*b*} Exposure was only observed for one animal.

the compounds only reduced spontaneous exploratory locomotor activity in relatively high doses (between 10 and 30 mg/kg, sc). These data indicated a low potential for inducing sedation and extrapyramidal side effects consistent with low D₂R occupancy. When locomotor activity was increased by phencyclidine (PCP), all tested compounds produced a potentiation of PCP-induced locomotor activity at doses between 3 and 10 mg/kg (data not shown). The antipsychotic potential of the compounds was also assessed in mice rendered hyperactive by methamphetamine (MAMP) or MK801 pretreatment. 5a caused a nonsignificant reduction in MAMP-induced hypermotility at 30 mg/kg, whereas 5g and 5f significantly reduced the MK801-induced hypermotility at 10 and 30 mg/kg, respectively. For 5g this represents a dose that is 3 times lower than the doses able to reduce spontaneous locomotor activity, whereas for 5f, it is a dose that is 3 times higher than that able to reduce exploratory lomotor activity. At the lower doses (1-0.3 mg/kg), 5k and 5j moderately increased MK801- and MAMP-induced hypermotility, respectively. Taken together, these preliminary data indicate that the new compounds, although possessing a valuable in vitro profile, fail to show an effect in animal models sensitive to antipsychotic treatment.

In parallel we measured plasma concentration of 5a,e-h,k after administration of 3 mg/kg (ip) in mice. Compound 4, characterized by an amide moiety linked to an arylpiperazine system, was tested as a reference analogue. In Table 2 and in Figure 2 SI, 4 showed an AUC (0–6 h interval, $h \cdot ng \cdot mL^{-1}$) of 128 while all the other tested compounds showed an AUC between 58 and 362. T_{max} was higher for **5e**,**f**,**k**, while all the other tested compounds displayed a similar value compared to 4. While C_{max} for 4 was 155 ng/mL, the values of the other analogues were 26-121 ng/mL. These data suggest that the new bisarylpiperazines do not possess an improved pharmacokinetic profile over 4. By comparison of the plasma level profiles of 5g,h,k, it emerges that after administration of 3 mg/kg ip in mice, the plasma concentration was higher for 5g than for 5k and 5h, probably indicating a different metabolic stability of these analogues.

In summary, following our strategy for developing innovative antipsychotics we generated novel bisarylpiperazinehexanes for a specific interaction with D_3R , 5-HT_{1A}R, and 5-HT_{2A}R, minimizing occupancy at D_2R and 5-HT_{2C}R. Among the compounds synthesized the multireceptor affinity profile of **5a**,**f**,**j** was particularly intriguing.

Since the risk of drug-induced cardiac arrhythmia is recognized as a major hurdle in the successful development of new drugs, investigation of hERG channel blockade is a key step for the drug discovery process. We decided to include hERG channel interaction evaluation at the early stage of the design process. While **5d** and **5l** showed a submicromolar activity on hERG, compounds 5a,f,g,j showed low liability to block hERG channels. When tested in vivo to investigate their behavioral effects, the novel compounds did not show the expected antipsychotic potential. Compound 5g was able to slightly reduce MK801-induced locomotor activity at 10 mg/kg, and in other cases, at the lowest doses tested, a potentiation of PCP-induced locomotor activity was observed. Although this novel series of compounds shows the desired affinity profile, the lack of antipsychotic potential in vivo might be explained assuming a different intrinsic activity with respect to 4 and analogues.¹⁴ Furthermore, the different orientation of the H-bond donor/acceptor group(s), supposed to interact with the Ser/Thr residues on TM5, with respect to the aromatic ring, supposed to contact TM6 (such as in 5a and 4, Figure 1), might affect receptor activation, thus contributing to the results obtained when measuring in vivo antipsychotic efficacy.

Experimental Section

Standard Synthesis of Symmetrical Compounds 5a-e. To a solution of the appropriate 1-arylpiperazine (1.0 mmol) in dry acetonitrile (30.0 mL), 1,6-dibromohexane (0.5 mmol) and TEA (0.5 mmol) were added. The mixture was stirred at room temperature for 12 h. The crude was extracted with dichloromethane (3 × 20 mL), dried, and evaporated. The residue was purified by means of flash chromatography (10% methanol in chloroform) to give the pure compound.

Standard Synthesis of Unsymmetrical Compounds 5f-m. To a solution of the 1-(6-bromohexyl)arylpiperazine (1.0 mmol) in dry acetonitrile (30.0 mL), the appropriate 1-arylpiperazine (1.3 mmol) and TEA (1.3 mmol) were added. The mixture was stirred at room temperature for 12 h. The crude was extracted with dichloromethane (3 × 20 mL), dried, and evaporated. The residue was purified by means of flash chromatography (10% methanol in chloroform) to give the pure compound.

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Supporting Information Available: Tables 1–3 SI, Figures 1 SI and 2 SI, experimental procedures for intermediates and characterization of final compounds, experimental procedures for molecular modeling studies, in vivo tests, and pharmacokinetic studies and elemental analysis results for final compounds. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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