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## Mitigation of $B_1^+$ inhomogeneity using spatially selective excitation with jointly designed quadratic spatial encoding magnetic fields and RF shimming

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—The inhomogeneity of flip angle distribution is one major challenge impeding the application of high field magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Here we report a method combining Spatially selective excitation using Generalized SEMs (SAGS) with RF shimming to achieve homogeneous excitation. This method can be an alternative approach to address the challenge of  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity using nonlinear gradients.

**Method**—We proposed a two-step algorithm, which first jointly optimizes the combination of nonlinear spatial encoding magnetic fields (SEMs) and the combination of multiple RF transmitter coils, and then optimizes the locations, RF amplitudes, and phases of the spokes.

**Results**—Our results show that jointly-designed SAGS and RF shimming can provide a more homogeneous flip angle distribution than using SAGS or RF shimming alone. Compared to RF shimming alone, our approach can reduce the relative standard deviation of flip angle by 56% and 52% using phantom and human head data, respectively.

**Conclusion**—The jointly-designed SAGS and RF shimming method can be used to achieve homogeneous flip angle distributions when fully parallel RF transmission is not available.

### Keywords

7T; RF inhomogeneity; nonlinear gradient; SAR; RF shimming; fast imaging

### Introduction

High-Field Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) can provide higher signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) (1) and different contrasts (2) than low field MRI, which can be exploited to improve

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spatial resolution or contrast-to-noise ratio without lengthening acquisition time (3). Yet, imaging at high fields remains challenging due the inhomogeneous flip angle distributions (4) caused by interference patterns between dielectric tissues and the RF fields, since the wavelength becomes comparable to the dimensions of the human body when  $B_0$  is equal or higher than 3 T (5). In 3 T abdominal imaging, this effect can result in signal voids, which can be particularly severe (6). In head imaging, interference patterns typically result in a central region with large flip angles surrounded by a ring of low flip angles (*i.e.*, “central brightening”) (7). Such spatially varying flip angle distribution can result in inhomogeneous contrast that can impair clinical diagnosis (8).

Different methods for mitigating  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity have been proposed. Adiabatic pulses can excite a homogeneous flip angle distribution, because they are highly insensitive to the  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity (9). One example is the slice-selective adiabatic pulse using multiple sub-pulses in high-field MRI (10). Alternatively, spatially selective RF excitation techniques (11), such as the fast- $k_z$  with 5 spokes (12) or the sparsity-enforced spokes placement algorithm (13), can be used to correct  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity. Simultaneous RF excitation from multiple RF coils with a fixed relative contribution but dynamic changes (14-18) can reduce  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneities. Fully parallel transmission (pTx) techniques (19,20) can achieve the desired flip angle distribution with a shorter RF pulse than the spatially selective RF excitation method. In RF shimming, there is a common driving RF waveform and only the amplitude and phase of each RF coil can be adjusted. pTx methods (21-26) provide more degrees of freedom for RF pulse design because they enable different RF waveforms being transmitted through each independent transmit coil element. Nonlinear spatial encoding magnetic fields (SEMs) have been used for selective magnetization excitation to reduce RF pulse length if the target excitation profile is a function of a linear combination of SEMs (27-32). Driving linear and quadratic SEMs between two excitation pulses can generate a spatially dependent transverse magnetization phase distribution that counteracts  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneities to achieve a homogeneous flip angle distribution (33). Recently, we proposed the SpAtially selective excitation with Generalized SEMs (SAGS) method to mitigate  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity, which enables to design pulses in a lower dimensional  $k$ -space if isocontours of  $B_1^+$  magnitude and isocontours of the designed SEM are geometrically similar (34).

In this work, we describe an alternative method to achieve homogeneous excitation using linear and nonlinear SEMs with RF shimming. By jointly designing SAGS and RF shimming, we are able to adjust both distributions of SEM and  $B_1^+$  strength such that the distribution of  $B_1^+$  strength can be approximated as a function of the distribution of SEM. This approximation allows efficient RF pulse design to achieve homogeneous excitation because of reduced  $k$ -space dimension in RF pulse design.

## Theory

### SAGS

We previously proposed the SAGS method to achieve homogeneous excitation using a linear combination of the spatial distributions of the  $z$ -components of SEMs (34). Considering a

2D slice-selective excitation scheme and using a spoke trajectory, the transverse magnetization magnitude  $M_{xy}(x,y)$  on the  $x$ - $y$  plane can be expressed as :

$$M_{xy}(x,y) = \left| B_1^+(x,y) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x,y)} \right|, \quad [1]$$

where  $B_1^+(x,y)$  is the spatial distribution of the right-circularly polarized RF magnetic field transmitted by a volume coil,  $W(k_s)$  is the RF pulse strength and phase at spoke location  $k_s$ , and  $h(x,y)$  denotes the combined SEM. To achieve uniform transverse magnetization  $m_{xy}$ , we need to determine  $W(k_s)$ ,  $k_s$  and  $h(x,y)$  such that

$\|m_{xy} - |B_1^+(x,y) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x,y)}|\|_2$  is minimized. The approximated optimal solution was found systematically in SAGS by first designing the  $h(x,y)$  such that  $|1/B_1^+(x,y)|$  can be approximated as a remapping of  $h(x,y)$ , and then determining  $W(k_s)$  and  $k_s$ . In the original SAGS implementation, we only designed the  $h(x,y)$  to fit an empirically measured  $B_1^+(x,y)$  (34). For this work, we proposed that, if we are not constrained to a pre-defined  $B_1^+(x,y)$ , we have more degrees of freedom in  $h(x,y)$  design so we can find a remapping of  $h(x,y)$  that matches more closely  $|1/B_1^+(x,y)|$ . We considered this new approach as the jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming.

### RF shimming

In RF shimming, the  $B_1^+$  fields of multiple RF coils are linearly combined to generate a net  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y,\xi)$ :

$$B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y,\xi) = \left| \sum_{c=1}^{n_c} \xi_c B_1^c(x,y) \right| \quad [2]$$

Here  $n_c$  denotes the number of RF coils.  $\xi_c$  and  $B_1^c(x,y)$  are the complex modulation coefficient (*i.e.*, amplitude and phase modulation) and the  $B_1^+$  of the  $c$ th RF coil, respectively.  $\xi$  denotes the collections of all  $\xi_c$ 's,  $c = 1 \dots n_c$ . The transverse magnetization excited using RF shimming with a single RF pulse is:

$$M_{xy}(x,y) = B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y,\xi) W(0) \quad [3]$$

In standard RF shimming, the coefficients  $\xi$  are typically chosen to achieve uniform flip angle distribution.

### Jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming

The distribution of the excited transverse magnetization using jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming techniques is:

$$M_{xy}(x, y) = \left| B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y)} \right| \quad [4]$$

Both  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi)$  and  $h(x, y)$  are unknown and are jointly designed by solving the optimization problem described next.

**The optimization problem**—Without losing generality, we assume that only SEMs of up to and including the second order are used in this study. Therefore,  $h(x, y, \nu)$  denotes the magnetic field generated by the unknown combination of SEMs.  $\nu$  denotes the unknown real-valued coefficients for combining SEMs. Its spatial distribution can be mathematically described using a quadratic polynomial:

$$h(x, y, \nu) = \sum_{q=0}^2 \sum_{r=0}^q \nu_{q,r} x^r y^{q-r}. \quad [5]$$

The goal is to find  $\xi$ ,  $\nu$ ,  $k_s$ , and  $W(k_s)$  that minimize the squared error:

$$\|m_{xy} - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}\|_2^2. \quad [6]$$

Note that  $m_{xy}$  is a real number, representing the targeted flip angle in a homogeneous excitation. An absolute value operator was used here, because we only aimed at achieving a uniform flip angle distribution without worrying about the phase distribution. This is a typical goal in mitigating  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity. However, the optimal solution is difficult to find because the cost function is not convex. In order to simplify the optimization process, we only use spokes that are symmetrically located around the origin of  $k$ -space, with equal amplitudes and conjugate phases. Under this condition,  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$  is real-valued, and Eq. [6] can be simplified as :

$$\|m_{xy} - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}\|_2^2. \quad [7]$$

Note that we dropped the absolute value operator in Eq. [6] and considered only positive  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$ . For each negative  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$ , we can negate the sign of  $W(k_s)$  such that  $\sum_{s \in S} -W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$  is positive. Thus, if a negative  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$  can minimize the cost, we should have found it as positive  $\sum_{s \in S} -W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$ . Note that such the solution  $\{-W(k_s), k_s, h(x, y, \nu)\}$  was also within our search when we took positive  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$ . In summary, dropping the absolute value operator in Eq. [6] did not matter for positive or negative  $\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$ . However, dropping the absolute value operator can be problematic when

$\sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}$  includes both positive and negative values. In this case, the optimal solution includes positive, negative, and zero flip angles within the imaging object. Such a case was considered unlikely in practice and excluded in our calculation.

If we only use two spokes, the equation can be further simplified as:

$$\|m_{xy} - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) 2W(k_1) \cos(2\pi j k_1 h(x, y, \nu))\|_2^2 = \|m_{xy} - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) \sum_{s \in S} W(k_s) e^{2\pi j k_s h(x, y, \nu)}\|_2^2 \quad [8]$$

Both Eqs. [7] and [8] can be solved with the following two-step procedure. Note that the argument to the cosine term in Eq. [8] contained a constant  $\nu_{00}$  (see Eq. [5]), which enables the optimization to generate a sine flip angle distribution as well. We can also assume that  $W(k_j)$  is real-valued variable based on the same argument.

**Step 1: Jointly design SEM and RF shimming**—Our previous work on SAGS suggested that: **I**) if  $1/|B_I^+(x, y)|$  can be approximated by a remapping of  $h(x, y)$ , then the 2-dimensional uniform excitation problem can be simplified to a 1-dimensional excitation problem; **II**) the flip angle homogeneity depends on the error between  $1/|B_I^+(x, y)|$  and the remapping of  $h(x, y)$ . In the first step, we simultaneously optimize  $\{\xi, \nu\}$  such that  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi)$  can be approximated by a remapping of  $h(x, y, \nu)$ :

$$1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) \approx D(h(x, y, \nu)). \quad [9]$$

Considering that  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi)$  and  $h(x, y, \nu)$  are both real-valued and smooth functions, we arbitrarily use a linear combination of the  $P^{\text{th}}$ -order harmonics to approximate  $D(h)$ :

$$D(h, \kappa, \rho) = \kappa_0 + \sum_{p=1}^P (\kappa_p \cos(ph) + \rho_p \sin(ph)). \quad [10]$$

With the above parametrization of  $D$ , the mapping problem (Eq. [9]) can be formulated as an optimization problem aiming at adjusting parameters  $\{\kappa, \rho, \xi, \nu\}$  to minimize the following error :

$$\|1 - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi) D(h(x, y, \nu), \kappa, \rho)\|_2^2 \quad [11]$$

The algorithm for solving Eq. [11] is described in the Appendix. Note that the parameters  $\{\kappa, \rho\}$  were nuisance parameters that were optimized for the choice of  $\{\xi, \nu\}$  but discarded

after the optimization. We also assumed function D is a cosine function for two spokes case as suggested by Eq. [8].

### Step 2: Design spoke locations and associated RF amplitudes and phases—

The optimized  $\{\xi^{\text{opt}}, \nu^{\text{opt}}\}$  yield  $h(x, y, \nu^{\text{opt}})$  and  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi^{\text{opt}})$ . The goal of step 2 is to achieve a homogeneous flip angle  $m_{xy}$  using  $2L$  spokes. We design the spoke locations ( $k^{\text{opt}}$ ) in the  $k_h$  space, constraining them to be symmetrically distributed around the center of  $k$ -space, and the spoke amplitudes ( $W^{\text{opt}}$ ) to achieve a homogeneous flip angle distribution.

$$\{W^{\text{opt}}, K^{\text{opt}}\} = \underset{\alpha, \beta}{\text{argmin}} \|m_{xy} - B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi^{\text{opt}}) \sum_{l=-L, l \neq 0}^L \alpha_l e^{2\pi j \beta_l h(x, y, \nu^{\text{opt}})}\|_2^2 + \lambda \|\alpha\|_2^2,$$

[12]

where  $\alpha_l$  was complex-valued.

In practice, we exhaustively search all possible spoke locations  $\beta_l$  and the amplitudes  $\alpha_l$  for these  $2L$  spokes are determined by the least squared solution to equation [12]. We added a regularization term  $\|\alpha\|_2^2$  as a cost function to suppress solutions that require excessive RF power.

## Methods

### Simulated $B_1^+$ maps

A uniform sphere was modeled with dielectric constant  $\epsilon_r = 52$  and electric conductivity  $\sigma = 0.55$  S/m to mimic the electrical properties of a human brain at 7 T. The full-wave electromagnetic (EM) field produced by a 20-element transmit array of identical circular coils uniformly packed around the sphere (diameter = 150 mm) was calculated using a semi-analytical multipole expansion (35,36). For each coil element of the transmit array, we calculated the  $B_1^+$  over a uniform grid of voxels ( $32 \times 32$ ) on a transverse FOV through the center of the sphere. All calculations were implemented using MATLAB (Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA) on a standard PC.

### Experimental $B_1^+$ maps

Phantom and *in vivo*  $B_1^+$  maps were measured using a 7 T scanner (Magnetom, Siemens, Erlangen, Germany) equipped with an 8-channel pTX setup. The phantom had a spherical shape with 16.8 mm diameter and was filled with a doped saline solution (1.25 g of  $\text{NiSO}_4 \times 6 \text{H}_2\text{O}$ ). A custom 8-element transceive head coil array was used (37). First, the Actual Flip-angle Imaging (AFI) method (38) was used to obtain a quantitative  $B_1^+$  map corresponding to the CP mode (3 mm isotropic resolution,  $\text{TR}_1/\text{TR}_2 = 30/150\text{ms}$ ,  $\text{TE}=1.5\text{ms}$ , max flip angle  $\pm 90^\circ$ ). Subsequently, a multi-slice Fast Low Angle Shot (FLASH) sequence was used to measure the relative signal amplitudes and phases corresponding to each of the individual channels and the CP-mode (3 mm isotropic resolution,  $\text{TR} = 500$  ms,  $\text{TE} = 2.0$

ms, max flip angle = +/- 10°). Finally, using the CP-mode, one additional FLASH image was obtained with a longer TE = 2.5 ms. Combining both CP-mode FLASH images, a  $\Delta B_0$  was constructed. The quantitative  $B_1^+$  maps corresponding to each of the individual transmit-channels were derived as shown in (39). The same sequence parameters were used for both phantom and *in vivo* measurements. One volunteer was examined with written informed consent in accordance with the regulations of our institute.

To reduce the noise in estimating the  $B_1^+$  from the empirical data, we used a total variation (TV) denoising method (40). The RF shimming coefficients for generating a homogenous  $B_1^+$  distribution were calculated based on the magnitude least squares method (24) using the CP mode as the initial guess. The computed RF shim was also denoised using TV regularization.

### Assessment of $|B_1^+|$ inhomogeneity mitigation

In all cases, we designed pulses to achieve a homogenous 10° flip angle distribution. In practice, we only searched the optimal solutions for 2 and 4 spokes located at conjugate locations. After optimizing pulse sequence design, the flip angle distribution was calculated based on the numerical solution of the Bloch equations. The performance in terms of achieved  $|B_1^+|$  homogeneity was evaluated by calculating the relative standard deviation  $\sigma$  (33):

$$\sigma = \text{std}(M_{xy}) / \text{mean}(M_{xy}), \quad [13]$$

where  $\text{std}(\bullet)$  and  $\text{mean}(\bullet)$  indicate the standard deviation and the mean of the transverse magnetization, respectively.

To evaluate excitation profile fidelity using the remapping of  $h(x, y, \mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}})$  to represent  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}})$ , we plotted the  $(h(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}}), 1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}}))$  pairs for all voxels. In the case of perfect remapping (Eq. [9]), all pairs should be represented by one curve  $D(h)$ . To quantify the accuracy of the remapping, we estimated a curve as

$$a_0 + \sum_{i=1}^5 (a_i \cos(ih) + b_i \sin(ih)) \quad [14]$$

based on all  $(h(x, y, \mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}}), 1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}}))$  pairs and calculated the errors between data pairs and the fitted curve. Where  $a_i, b_i$  are constants estimated by least squared fitting. The error was quantified as :

$$\text{std}(1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}}) - D(h(x, y, \mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}}))) / \text{mean}(D(h(x, y, \mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}}))). \quad [15]$$

Note that the optimized  $h(x,y, \mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}})$  is different between 2 (Eq. [8]) and 4 spokes (Eq. [7]) excitation, because  $D$  is restricted to a cosine function in the 2 spokes excitation. For comparison, we simulated the flip angle distribution obtained with the fast- $k_z$  method, which used 5 spokes (12), and with SAGS using the standard RF, *i.e.*, modulation coefficients designed to achieve a homogeneous  $|B_1^+|$  distribution. Finally, we also simulated the flip angle distribution obtained by using jointly designed fast- $k_z$  (with only linear SEMs) and RF shimming to investigate the differences between using nonlinear and linear SEMs.

To estimate the energy deposition associated with each method, for the simulated data we computed the global specific absorption rate (SAR) for each excitation (36). To make sure the number of spokes was sufficient in our algorithm, we simulated 99 equispaced spokes SAGS, which used the same  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y)$  and  $h(x,y,\mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}})$  as in the jointly designed 4-spoke SAGS and RF shimming. We also simulated the flip angle distribution of the jointly designed 4-spoke SAGS and RF shimming using standard RF shim coefficients as the initial guess to investigate how the initial guess affects the Step I of the optimization.

## Results

Figure 1 shows the experimental  $B_1^+$  maps of the brain and phantom measured at 7 T.

Figure 2 shows  $|B_1^+|$  maps obtained with standard RF shimming aiming at maximizing homogeneity (top row), with jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming using 2 (second row) and 4 (third row) spokes, and with jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming (bottom row), for simulations (left column), phantom (middle column) and human head (right column) experiments. On visual inspection, standard RF shimming alone yielded relatively homogeneous  $|B_1^+|$  distribution for both simulation and experimental data. The jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming and jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming both resulted in spatially inhomogeneous but smooth  $|B_1^+|$  distributions. These asymmetric  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+$  distributions were results of the optimization. We also found that the  $|B_1^+|$  maps generated by the jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming method were significantly different from the other two cases. This was because: first, this  $|B_1^+|$  distribution was found to be able to generate a more homogeneous flip angle distribution by the numerical optimization. Second, fast- $k_z$  can excite all flip angle distributions parameterized by  $a_0 + \cos(a_1x) + \cos(a_2y)$  under a uniform  $B_1^+$  (12), where  $a_0$ ,  $a_1$  and  $a_2$  are arbitrary constants. Indeed, the numerical optimization found a  $B_1^+$  distribution resembling a distribution with two peaks, which can counter-act with the parameterized flip angle distribution described above to achieve a homogeneous flip angle distribution

One key requirement for our proposed method to generate a target (homogeneous) flip angle distribution is to find a remapping between  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}})$  and  $h(x,y,\mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}})$  (Eq. [9]). Figure 3 shows the distribution of  $(1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}}), h(x,y,\mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}}))$  pairs at all voxels in the imaging object. Ideally, in the case of perfect remapping, this distribution should be represented by one curve (Eq. [9]). In practice, we estimated this curve by using a 10<sup>th</sup>-order polynomial (red curves in Figure 3). Across simulations and experimental data, we found that the relation between  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{opt}})$  and  $h(x,y,\mathbf{v}^{\text{opt}})$  is more closely described by a smooth one-dimensional function in jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming (middle and



bottom rows of Figure 3) than in standard RF shimming (top row of Figure 3). In jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming, results with 4 spokes had more accurate remapping between  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y, \xi^{\text{opt}})$  and  $h(x,y, \nu^{\text{opt}})$  than results with 2 spokes (note reduced errors between middle and bottom row in Figure 3). This is due to the fact that different cost functions (2-spoke in Eq. [8] and 4-spoke in Eq. [7]) were used in the optimization. In particular, the 2-spoke posed more stringent constraint by enforcing  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y, \xi^{\text{opt}})$  to be represented as a cosine function of  $h$ .

Figure 4 shows the achieved flip angle distributions for all excitation methods. One-spoke excitation with standard RF shim generated a relatively homogeneous flip angle distribution (Figure 4A), matching the  $|B_1^+|$  distribution (top row in Figure 2). The deviations from the target homogeneous flip angle distribution were  $\sigma = 6.4\%$ ,  $13.0\%$ , and  $13.2\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively. Fast- $k_z$  applied with standard RF shim yielded  $\sigma = 6.3\%$ ,  $11.1\%$ , and  $11.0\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively (Figure 4B). The SAGS method applied with standard RF shim yielded  $\sigma = 6.2\%$ ,  $10.7\%$ , and  $10.3\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively (Figure 4C). Fast- $k_z$  and SAGS applied with standard RF shim both show very similar excitation profile and only marginally improved the flip angle homogeneity compared to standard RF shimming alone.

The jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming generated flip angle distributions more homogeneous than standard RF shimming alone (Figure 4D and 4E), even though the resulting  $B_1^+$  distributions showed larger spatial variation (Figure 2, second and third rows). In particular, using jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 spokes, the deviations from a perfectly homogeneous flip angle distribution were  $\sigma = 2.8\%$ ,  $9.3\%$ , and  $7.7\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively. Using 4 spokes, the error was instead  $\sigma = 2.8\%$ ,  $5.1\%$ , and  $6.2\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively. These results suggest that, even if the  $B_1^+$  distribution jointly designed using quadratic SEMs is inhomogeneous, it can still achieve a homogeneous flip angle distribution. Figure 4F shows the flip angle distribution using the  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+$  obtained from the jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 99 equi-spaced spokes. The results were similar to those with 4 spokes, suggesting that the number of spokes, after careful tuning of spoke locations, amplitudes, and phases, is not the bottleneck for further improving the flip angle homogeneity. Figure 4G shows that jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming with 5 spokes generated a more homogeneous flip angle distribution than the fast- $k_z$  applied with standard RF shim, with  $\sigma = 3.8\%$ ,  $9.4\%$ , and  $8.1\%$  for simulations, phantom, and human head experimental data, respectively. This result supports the use of joint design approach. SAR and homogeneity for simulation data are summarized in Table 1. Note that the SAR associated with the fast- $k_z$  method using standard RF shim was very similar to the SAR of standard RF shimming alone. In fact, the side spokes of fast- $k_z$  had a minimal contribution to improving the homogeneity of the flip angle distribution and the center spoke had similar amplitude than the single spoke excitation of standard RF shimming. In particular, the amplitude of side spokes along  $k_x$  and  $k_y$  axes were  $0.9\%$  and  $0.1\%$  of the center spoke, respectively.

The initial guess for  $B_{Ishim}^+(x,y,\xi^{opt})$  in the calculations for Figures 2 and 4 was chosen to be the CP mode of the combination of all transmit coils. We repeated the simulations using the result from standard RF shimming as the initial guess to test the stability of our method. We found that the results of the jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 4 spokes were not sensitive to the initial guess for  $B_{Ishim}^+(x,y,\xi^{opt})$ , as shown by the similarity between Figure 5 and Figure 4E.

## Discussion

We proposed a joint design method to improve flip angle homogeneity by optimizing the combination of nonlinear SEMs and RF shimming concurrently. In our previous SAGS approach, we clearly demonstrated the advantage of establishing a remapping between a given  $B_1^+$  and a combined SEM in simplifying the pulse design in a lower dimensional  $k$ -space when the goal is to achieve a homogenous flip angle distribution (34). The current study further extends this advantage to encompass RF shimming. Specifically, we used both simulated and experimentally measured data to demonstrate the benefits of using linear and quadratic SEMs to achieve a better remapping between a  $B_1^+$  and SEM combination. This better remapping also led to improved flip angle distribution homogeneity (Figure 4). We showed that our proposed jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming approach with 4 spokes can improve flip angle homogeneity by more than 50% compared to standard RF shimming.

Our results support the importance of optimizing the combination of transmit coils (RF shimming) while simultaneously tailoring the combinations of linear and nonlinear SEMs. The simplest approach would be to first use standard RF shimming to search for the optimal complex-valued coil combination coefficients that achieve a homogeneous  $B_1^+$  distribution (14) and then adjust the combination of linear and nonlinear SEMs such that  $B_1^+$  can be approximated as a remapping of the SEM. However, our results showed that such sequential approach is sub-optimal (Figure 4C) compared to designing RF shimming and adjusting the combination of SEMs simultaneously (Figure 4E).

The proposed approach currently has two limitations, which are related to 1) the accuracy of the remapping (Eq. [9]) and 2) the use of a finite number of spokes to engineer the desired flip angle distribution (Eq. [12]). However, Figures 4E and 4F show that flip angle homogeneity is similar between the results using 99 equi-spaced spokes and the results using 4 tailored spokes. This suggests that the number of spokes is not the bottleneck in improving the flip angle homogeneity, but rather that the accuracy of the remapping between the  $B_1^+$  and the SEM is the key to achieving the ultimate flip angle distribution. In fact, we observed that a smaller fitting error in Figure 3 generally corresponded to a more homogeneous flip angle distribution in Figure 4.

In the ideal case of homogeneous  $B_1^+$ , RF excitation using linear or nonlinear SEM can produce different flip angle excitation at locations with different SEM magnitudes of SEM. This suggests that an inhomogeneous flip angle distribution can be carefully crafted to counter-act an inhomogeneous  $B_1^+$  distribution, such that a homogeneous flip angle distribution is created. These were indeed the cases in Figures 4D and 4E.

We envision two potential methods that could further decrease the remapping error. One possibility is to use more transmit coils in order to increase the degrees of freedom of RF shimming. The other possibility is to use more nonlinear SEMs. Specifically, we may consider either higher than the 2<sup>nd</sup>-order SEMs (41) or localized SEMs (42), such that the optimal iso-intensity of  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+$  in our method is no longer restricted to conic. However experimental results are needed to validate such speculation.

Note that the combination of pTx and nonlinear SEMs has been reported to effectively produce a homogeneous flip angle distribution (43). Our proposed method, however, is different from the combination of pTx and nonlinear SEMs (43): 1) Like RF shimming, we only need one common driving RF exciter to implement the RF pulse using a vector modulator to deliver the same waveform with varying amplitudes and phases for each transmit coil (44). Thus, the complexity and the cost are expected to be less than a pTx with nonlinear SEM system 2) The pulse sequence involving nonlinear SEMs is typically designed on a multi-dimensional  $k$ -space, whose dimension equals to the number of SEMs. Jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming is one method to reduce design complexity with a reduced  $k$ -space dimension. The benefit of such dimension reduction has been reported in our previous work (34).

While our results seem promising, the practical limitation of our method is the need of quadratic SEMs, which are not widely accessible yet. The other potential challenge of our method is the need of accurate phase and magnitude  $B_1^+$  maps for the individual transmit coils. In the final step of our algorithm, we search all possible spokes locations exhaustively. This approach is computationally possible when only a few spokes are used (the search for 2 and 4 in this work required less than 5 seconds) because the computational time is linearly proportional to the number of combinations of all possible spoke locations. Specifically, the computation time would become  $T^{n/2}$  for  $n$ -spoke if time  $T$  was spent in searching for a 2-spoke solution. In order to use a large number of spokes, the combination of greedy type methods and gradient descent methods could be a more efficient approach to optimize the position of the spokes (45).

In this study, we restricted the spoke locations to be symmetrically located around the center of  $k$ -space, for the sake of computation efficiency. If spoke locations,  $\beta$ , are symmetric (conjugated), spoke coefficients are automatically conjugated, because  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y)$  was defined to be real. In this case, we can solve  $\alpha$  efficiently by least squares fitting (Eq. [12]). Naturally, allowing spokes with arbitrary locations, amplitudes, and phases can improve the results by increasing the degrees of freedom of pulse design at the cost of higher complexity in the optimization. Note, however, that even using 4 spokes with the restriction of conjugated spoke locations and equal amplitudes, we were able to achieve a relatively homogeneous flip angle distribution compared to the test case with 99 spokes (Figures 4E and 4F). Therefore, we expect minimal improvement in flip angle homogeneity by using more spokes or without restricting spoke locations.

Eq. [12] excluded  $\ell=0$ , because this spoke ( $\ell=0$ ) only contributes to a constant flip angle, not very useful in counteracting an inhomogeneous  $B_1^+$ . Furthermore, using even number ( $2n$ ) of spokes can also produce any possible excitation distribution using  $2n-1$  spokes. This

is because when two central spokes are very close to 0 ( $k$ -space center), the result is equivalent to the case of using  $2n-1$  spokes. Based on these two reasons, we did not include the  $\ell = 0$  term in our calculation.

The same strategy of jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming may be applied to uniform 3D excitation if there exists a good remapping between the RF shim and the SEM. However, we expect that the remapping error may be significant limiting the performance of this method in achieving a homogeneous volumetric flip angle distribution.

Table 1 shows that the relative SAR was lower for the jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 spokes than for the jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 4 spokes, whereas the homogeneity of the two solutions was nearly identical. This is likely due to the fact that an SAR minimization constraint was not included in the design of the  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+$  and  $h$  (Eq. [11]). Including SAR minimization in the pulse design is expected to increase the complexity of the optimization.

One clear disadvantage of our method is a higher SAR (Table 1) compared to standard RF shimming. This is the consequence of seeking a homogeneous flip angle distribution in the RF shimming step. Since there is a trade-off between  $M_{xy}$  homogeneity and SAR (33), we expect that modifying our pulse design, for example, to allow less extreme  $B_1^+$  values with conic iso-intensity contours, could reduce SAR at the cost of flip angle homogeneity. Additionally, we may impose local SAR constraints by using virtual observation points to jointly design other pulses with lower SAR. Further investigation is required to validate these hypotheses.

In conclusion, we proposed a jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming approach to mitigate  $B_1^+$  inhomogeneity, a prominent artifact in high-field imaging. Our simulations and experimental results suggest that this approach could facilitate structural and functional imaging at ultra high-field MRI.

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## Appendix

### Algorithm for minimizing equation [11]

#### Initializing parameters

Our chosen initial guess for  $\xi^{\text{old}}$  is the combination of circular-polarized (CP) mode (44), and the initial guess for  $\kappa^{\text{old}}$  and  $\rho^{\text{old}}$  are zeros except  $k_1^{\text{old}} = \max_{x,y} (1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi))$ .

$$\nu^{\text{old}} = \underset{\nu}{\text{argmin}} \left\| \sum_{q=0}^2 \sum_{r=0}^1 \nu_{q,r} (x^r y^{q-r}) - \arccos \frac{B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x, y, \xi)}{\kappa_1} \right\|_2^2 \quad [\text{A1}]$$

### Iterative updating

Using a combination of the gradient descent algorithm and least squares solution iteratively, we adjusted  $\{\boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}, \boldsymbol{\xi}, \boldsymbol{\nu}\}$  to minimize

$$\Phi(\boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}, \boldsymbol{\xi}, \boldsymbol{\nu}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi})) = \left\| e^{iB_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi})} - \sum_{c=1}^{n_c} \xi_c B_1^c(x, y) D(h(x, y, \boldsymbol{\nu}), \boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}) \right\|_2^2 \quad [\text{A2}]$$

where  $B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi})$  denotes the phase distribution of  $\sum_{c=1}^{n_c} \xi_c B_1^c(x, y)$ . Allowing  $B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi})$  as a free parameter in the optimization is equivalent to using a least square magnitude design to relax the phase constraint on the desired excitation profile.

### Step 1

With given  $\boldsymbol{\kappa}^{\text{old}}, \boldsymbol{\rho}^{\text{old}}, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}}, \boldsymbol{\nu}^{\text{old}}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}})$ , we updated the value of  $\boldsymbol{\nu}$  using the gradient descent algorithm with the step size  $\lambda$

$$\boldsymbol{\nu}^{\text{new}} = \boldsymbol{\nu}^{\text{old}} - \lambda \nabla_{\boldsymbol{\nu}} \Phi \quad [\text{A3}]$$

### Step 2

Use the least squares algorithm to find the  $\boldsymbol{\kappa}^{\text{new}}$  and  $\boldsymbol{\rho}^{\text{new}}$

$$\{\boldsymbol{\kappa}^{\text{new}}, \boldsymbol{\rho}^{\text{new}}\} = \underset{\boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}}{\text{argmin}} \Phi(\boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}}, \boldsymbol{\nu}^{\text{new}}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}})) \quad [\text{A4}]$$

### Step 3

Use a least squares algorithm to find the new  $\boldsymbol{\xi}$ :

$$\boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{new}} = \underset{\boldsymbol{\kappa}, \boldsymbol{\rho}}{\text{argmin}} \Phi(\boldsymbol{\kappa}^{\text{new}}, \boldsymbol{\rho}^{\text{new}}, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}}, \boldsymbol{\nu}^{\text{new}}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \boldsymbol{\xi}^{\text{old}})) \quad [\text{A5}]$$

We repeat Step 1 to 3 until the cost converges:

$$\Phi(\kappa^{\text{old}}, \rho^{\text{old}}, \xi^{\text{old}}, \nu^{\text{old}}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \xi^{\text{old}})) - \Phi(\kappa^{\text{new}}, \rho^{\text{new}}, \xi^{\text{new}}, \nu^{\text{new}}, B_{1\text{phase}}^+(x, y, \xi^{\text{new}})) < \epsilon$$

[A6]

When not converging, we update  $\kappa^{\text{old}}, \rho^{\text{old}}, \xi^{\text{old}}, \nu^{\text{old}} \leftarrow \kappa^{\text{new}}, \rho^{\text{new}}, \xi^{\text{new}}, \nu^{\text{new}}$  and repeat Step 1 to 3. At convergence, we obtain the optimized parameters  $\kappa^{\text{opt}}, \rho^{\text{opt}}, \xi^{\text{opt}}, \nu^{\text{opt}} \leftarrow \kappa^{\text{new}}, \rho^{\text{new}}, \xi^{\text{new}}, \nu^{\text{new}}$ .

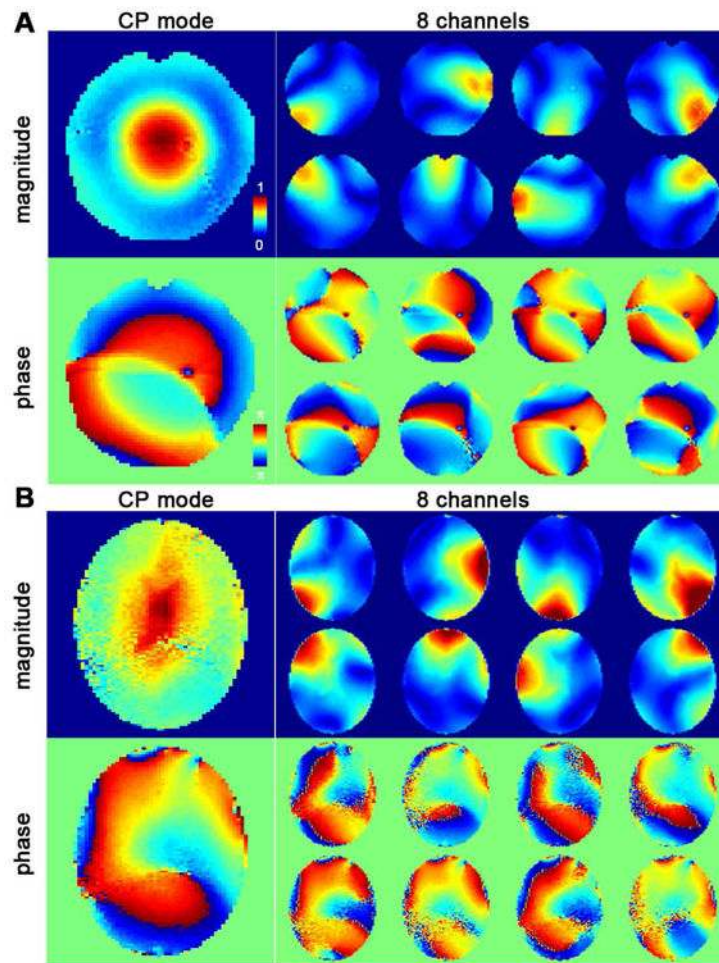
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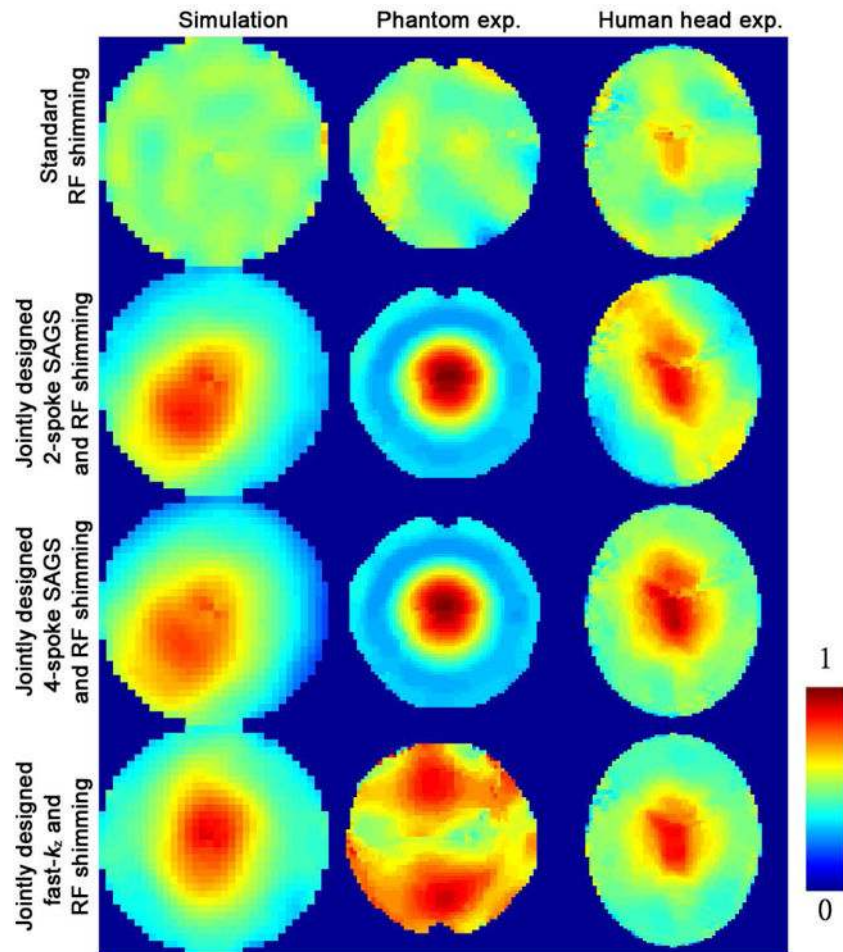
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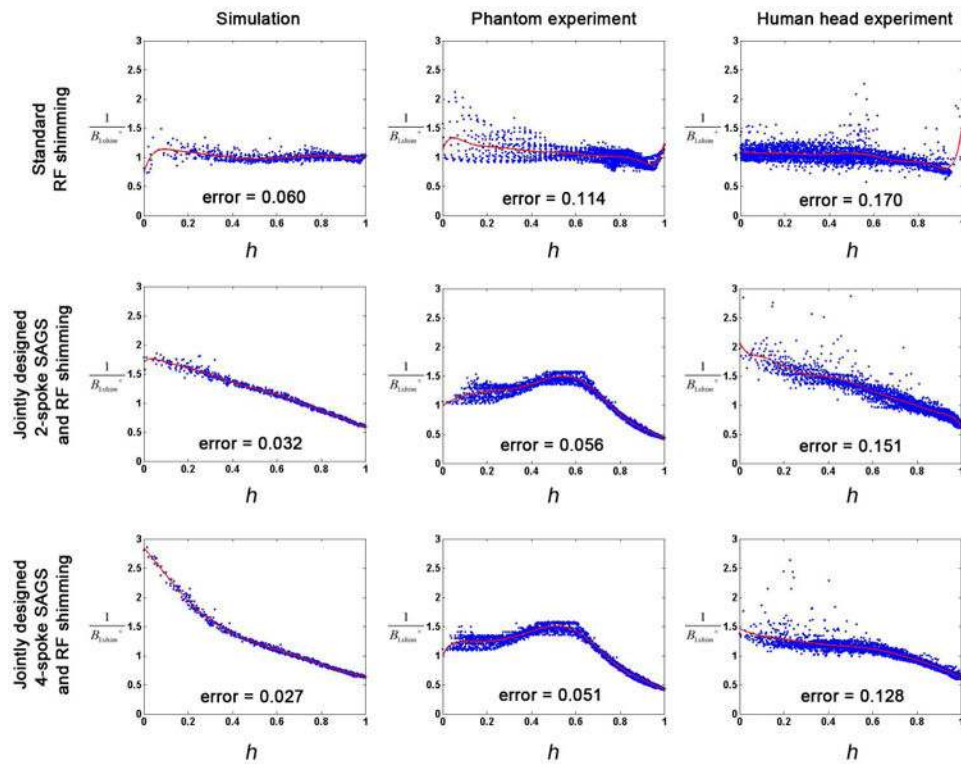




**Figure 1.** (A)  $B_1^+$  amplitude and phase maps of 8 transmit channels and the CP mode combination in a saline phantom; (B)  $B_1^+$  amplitude and phase maps of 8 transmit channels and the CP mode combination in a human head.

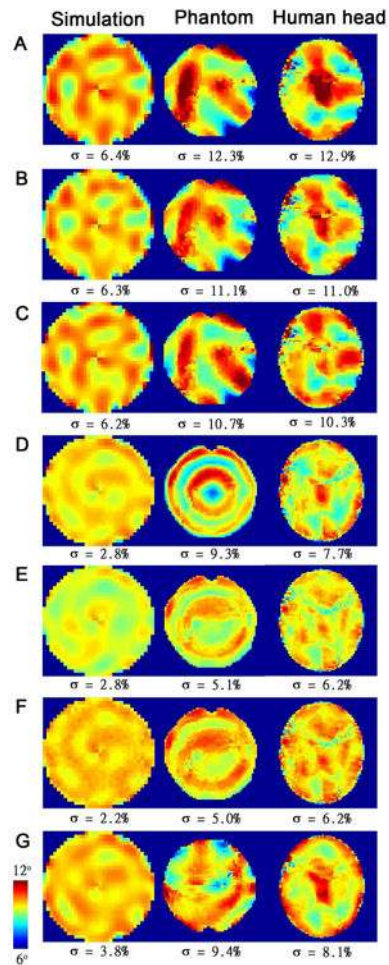


**Figure 2.**  $|B_1^+|$  maps obtained with standard RF shimming aiming at achieving the maximal homogeneity (top row), jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 (second row) and 4 (second to bottom row) spokes, and jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming (bottom row) for simulations (left column), phantom experiment (middle column), and human head experiment (right column).



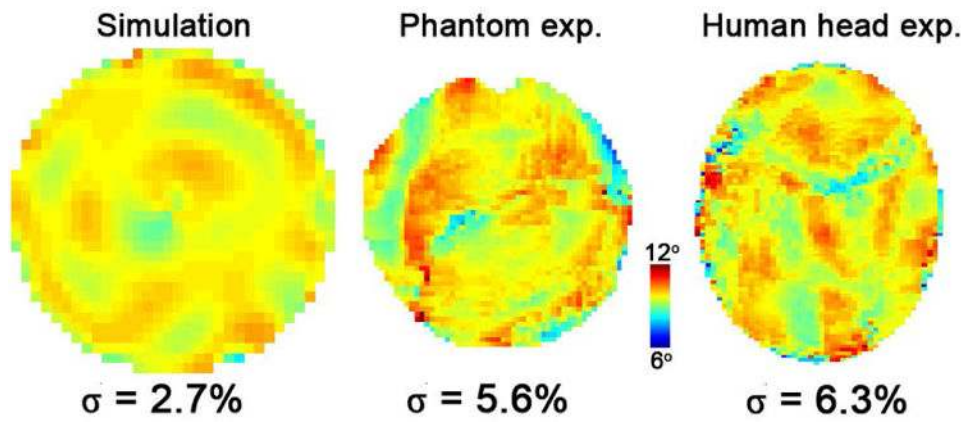
**Figure 3.**

The relationship between  $h(x,y)$  and  $1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y)$  in standard RF shimming (top row), jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 (second row) or 4 spokes (bottom row) using simulations, experimental saline phantom data, and experimental human head data. The mapping error quantified by the root-mean-square of the residuals between  $(h(x,y), 1/B_{1\text{shim}}^+(x,y))$  pairs and a fitted curve using 10<sup>th</sup>-order polynomials is reported for each plot.



**Figure 4.**

Flip angle distributions. A: one spoke excitation with standard RF shim. B: 5 spokes fast- $k_z$  with standard RF shim. C: SAGS with standard RF shim and 4 spokes. D: jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 spokes. E: jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 4 spokes. F: jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with equi-spaced 99 spokes. G: jointly designed fast- $k_z$  and RF shimming with 5 spokes. Simulations, experimental saline phantom data, and experimental human head data are shown in left, middle, and right columns, respectively. The relative standard deviation  $\sigma$  is reported below each map.



**Figure 5.** Flip angle distribution maps generated by jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 4 spokes with  $B_{1\text{shim}}^+$  optimized for a homogeneous flip angle as the initial guess. The relative standard deviation  $\sigma$  is reported below each plot.

**Table 1**Relative SAR and flip angle homogeneity ( $\sigma$ ) of different methods using simulation data.

Methods	Relative SAR	Homogeneity ( $\sigma$ )
Standard RF shim	1.00	6.4%
Fast- $k_z$ + standard RF shim	1.00	6.3%
SAGS + standard RF shim with 4 spokes	0.48	6.2%
Jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 2 spokes	2.56	2.8%
Jointly designed SAGS and RF shimming with 4 spokes	11.16	2.8%
Jointly designed Fast- $k_z$ and RF shimming	6.62	3.8%

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