

Gamma-hydroxybutyrate enhances mood and prosocial behavior without affecting plasma oxytocin and testosterone



Oliver G. Bosch^{a,*}, Christoph Eisenegger^b, Jürg Gertsch^c, Robin von Rotz^a,
Dario Dornbierer^a, M. Salomé Gachet^c, Markus Heinrichs^d, Thomas C. Wetter^e,
Erich Seifritz^a, Boris B. Quednow^a

^a Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, Psychiatric Hospital, University of Zurich, Lenggstrasse 31, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland

^b Department of Basic Psychological Research and Research Methods, Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, Liebiggasse 5, 1010 Vienna, Austria

^c Institute of Biochemistry and Molecular Medicine, University of Bern, Bühlstrasse 28, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

^d Department of Psychology, Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg, Stefan-Meier-Strasse 8, 79104 Freiburg i. Br., Germany

^e Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University of Regensburg, Universitätsstraße 84, 93053 Regensburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) is a GHB-/GABA_B-receptor agonist. Reports from GHB abusers indicate euphoric, prosocial, and empathogenic effects of the drug. We measured the effects of GHB on mood, prosocial behavior, social and non-social cognition and assessed potential underlying neuroendocrine mechanisms. GHB (20 mg/kg) was tested in 16 healthy males, using a randomized, placebo-controlled, cross-over design. Subjective effects on mood were assessed by visual-analogue-scales and the GHB-Specific-Questionnaire. Prosocial behavior was examined by the Charity Donation Task, the Social Value Orientation test, and the Reciprocity Task. Reaction time, memory, empathy, and theory-of-mind were also tested. Blood plasma levels of GHB, oxytocin, testosterone, progesterone, dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), cortisol, aldosterone, and adrenocorticotropic-hormone (ACTH) were determined. GHB showed stimulating and sedating effects, and elicited euphoria, disinhibition, and enhanced vitality. In participants with low prosociality, the drug increased donations and prosocial money distributions. In contrast, social cognitive abilities such as emotion recognition, empathy, and theory-of-mind, and basal cognitive functions were not affected. GHB increased plasma progesterone, while oxytocin and testosterone, cortisol, aldosterone, DHEA, and ACTH levels remained unaffected. GHB has mood-enhancing and prosocial effects without affecting social hormones such as oxytocin and testosterone. These data suggest a potential involvement of GHB-/GABA_B-receptors and progesterone in mood and prosocial behavior.

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1. Introduction

Gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) is an endogenous short-chain fatty acid neuromodulator which is biosynthetically derived from the major inhibitory neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyrate (GABA) (Bessman and Fishbein, 1963). It appears to bind to specific GHB- and GABA_B-receptors (Snead, 2000). A potent interaction of GHB with extrasynaptic $\alpha 4\beta\delta$ GABA_A receptors suggested previously has recently been challenged (Connelly et al., 2013). While physiological concentrations of GHB seem to be insufficient to

stimulate GABA_B receptors, this mechanism is discussed to be responsible for its psychotropic effects when administered orally (Andresen et al., 2011). Although the physiological role of endogenous GHB is still unclear, some evidence points to an anti-apoptotic activity (Wendt et al., 2014). Apart from its direct effects on GHB- and GABA_B-receptors, GHB has neuromodulatory properties on glutamate, dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, and cholinergic transmission (Andresen et al., 2011). Clinically, GHB is internationally registered for the treatment of narcolepsy, and in some European countries for the treatment of alcohol withdrawal and craving (Keating, 2014). Moreover, it was recently proposed as an experimental therapeutic in depression (Bosch et al., 2012).

GHB abusers report enhancing effects on sociability and mood (Sumnall et al., 2008), whereby the drug has gained some notoriety as a “club drug” used by a small but growing part of the population (Carter et al., 2009). In some aspects, the acute effects of GHB

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, Psychiatric Hospital, University of Zurich Lenggstrasse 31, PO Box 1931, 8008 Zurich, Switzerland. Fax: +41 443 834 456.

E-mail address: oliver.bosch@bli.uzh.ch (O.G. Bosch).

resemble the entactogenic effects (i.e., feelings of closeness, desire for physical contact) of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, ecstasy), which has stimulated its most widespread street name “liquid ecstasy” (Uys and Niesink, 2005). MDMA is known to enhance emotional empathy and prosocial behavior (Bedi et al., 2010; Hysek et al., 2014), which was paralleled by increased oxytocin plasma levels (Schmid et al., 2014). Additionally to the MDMA-like entactogenic effects, GHB was reported to enhance sexually connoted affiliative behavior (Lee and Levounis, 2008), indicating an involvement of more neuroendocrine mechanisms than the oxytoninergic pathway. GHB is known to affect levels of several steroidal hormones such as neurosteroids and cortisol in animals and humans (Bosch et al., 2012), and GABA_B receptors are discussed in the regulation of testosterone secretion (Amikishieva, 2007). Testosterone is a sex steroid hormone which is known to play an important role in human social interaction (Eisenegger et al., 2010; Bos et al., 2012). Taking these evidences together, the androgen system with the primary hormone testosterone and its precursor dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) seems another plausible candidate neuroendocrine mechanism of the prosocial effects of GHB.

Anxiolytic and stress reducing effects are attributed to neurosteroids such as progesterone, tetrahydroprogesterone (3 α , 5 α -THP), and tetrahydrodeoxycorticosterone (THDOC), whose syntheses are promoted by GHB in animals (Barbaccia et al., 2002). Moreover, animal and human data show that progesterone release mirrors an individual's level of social-affiliative motivation (Maner et al., 2010). Also, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA-) axis activity was bidirectionally altered by the drug (Van Cauter et al., 1997; Nava et al., 2007), and it was shown that stress influences social interactions (Tomova et al., 2014). Consequently GHB might elicit its social effects either directly via GHB/GABA receptors or indirectly by increasing plasma levels of hormones such as oxytocin and testosterone, by altering neurosteroidogenesis or through the modulation of the HPA-axis.

In order to characterize the acute effects of GHB on prosocial behavior, social cognition, and mood, we assessed a social decision-making and social cognition test battery, as well as subjective mood ratings in a randomized, placebo-controlled, balanced, cross-over design in 16 healthy males. We decided to focus on male individuals to reduce variance due to steroid hormone fluctuations during menstrual cycle. Potential neuroendocrine parameters mediating GHB effects were investigated by determination of plasma time-courses of oxytocin, testosterone, DHEA, progesterone, and stress hormones such as cortisol, aldosterone, and adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH). We hypothesized that GHB enhances mood, emotional empathy, and prosocial behavior, while increasing plasma levels of oxytocin, testosterone, and progesterone and altering HPA axis activity.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Participants

Sixteen healthy, male, and non-smoking participants with mean age of 23.9 years (± 2.9 SD, range 19–29), a mean verbal intelligence quotient (IQ) of 104.2 (± 14.6 SD, range 86–145), and a mean weight of 74.4 kg (± 8.2 SD, range 60.4–87.0) participated in the study. Exclusion criteria were any Axis-I DSM-IV psychiatric disorder, any form of addiction or regular illegal drug use (lifetime use ≥ 5 occasions) with exception of occasional cannabis use, a lifetime history of GHB use, a neurological disorder or head injury, clinically relevant medical diseases, a family history of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, and any use of prescription drugs. All participants had to abstain from caffeine on the study days and from

alcohol for at least 24 h before the experiments. In order to ensure drug abstinence on the test days, a urine screening was done using a Dimension RXL Max (Siemens, Erlangen, Germany) immunoassay. The study was approved by the Cantonal Ethics Committee of Zurich and by Swissmedic and registered at ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT02342366). All participants gave written informed consent according to the Declaration of Helsinki and were compensated for their participation.

2.2. Procedure

The study design consisted of four sessions: screening session, experimental day I, experimental day II, and follow-up session, all separated by an interval of seven days. We used a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled, and balanced cross-over design. A trained psychiatrist carried out a Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis-I Disorders during the screening session. We assessed drug use with the Interview for Psychotropic Drug Consumption (Quednow et al., 2004). Subjects also performed the Mehrfachwahl-Wortschatz-Intelligenztest (Lehrl, 2005), a standardized German vocabulary test, in order to estimate potential premorbid verbal IQ. Finally, in the screening session subjects performed a brief neuropsychological test battery to assure normal cognitive functions (data not shown). On the experimental days a peripheral venous catheter for blood sampling was placed at 8:30am, and GHB (Xyrem® solution; 20 mg/kg in juice) or placebo (salted juice) was given orally at 9:00am. Each experimental session lasted for 225 min (Supplementary Fig. 1). Subjects had to be fasting during the morning of the experiments. At the follow-up session, the neuropsychological test battery of the screening session was repeated (data will be published elsewhere).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Subjective effects

For the measurement of acute subjective drug effects we used four Visual Analogue Scales (VAS) assessing the general drug effect, sedation, stimulation, and dizziness at the time points t -15, +40, +60, +100, +120, and +180 min, as well as a GHB Specific Questionnaire (GSQ) (Kim et al., 2008) at t -17, +38, +66, +104, +138, +198 min. The GSQ consists of 15 sensory-motor and cognitive items measuring involuntary muscle jerking, silliness, happiness, loss of memory or amnesia, acoustic hallucinations, increased sexuality, visual hallucinations, tendency to talk, disinhibition, heightened sense of touch, increased sensitivity to sound, stimulation, euphoria, and vitality. Subjects rate the occurrence/intensity of each item via five scales, ranging from 0 to 4 (“not present” to “strong”).

2.3.2. Charity donation task

Subjects performed a computer-based Charity Donation Task (CDT, adapted from Hare et al. (2010)) at t +70 min. Subjects were asked to read a description of 10 charities (Supplementary Table 1), and were then informed that they could donate 0–40 Swiss Francs (CHF) from their study compensation to one of the listed charities. Finally, subjects were asked to rate on a 7-point rating scale (“not at all” to “very much”), how much the charity deserved the donation, and how much pleasure the subject felt about having donated.

2.3.3. Social value orientation

The Social Value Orientation (SVO) test was implemented at t +90 min. It is a paper-based, resource allocation test to assess social behavior (Murphy et al., 2011). The subjects were instructed to choose their favorite joint distribution between themselves and another person, from six primary and nine secondary SVO slider items with a resource allocation choice over a defined continuum of

joint payoffs. The subjects were told that two of their choices would be randomly selected, and that funds would be shared according to these choices. Prosocial behavior – defined as maximizing the total of resources for the self and others and minimizing the difference between the two – is indicated by the wideness of the SVO angle, which increases when subjects maximized the allocation for the others. For the calculation of the SVO angle please see the Supplementary Material.

2.3.4. Reciprocity task

To investigate effects of GHB on subjects' positive reciprocity, i.e., their tendency to respond to a positive action with another positive action, we administered a Reciprocity Task at $t + 160$ min. This computer-based, simulated task is similar to the Trust Game (Evans and Krueger, 2011). After the decision-making phase, subjects had to rate the amount of pleasure they felt related to their decisions. For details please see Supplementary Material.

2.3.5. Multifaceted empathy task

Participants performed the Multifaceted Empathy Task (MET) at $t + 75$ min. This computer test comprises 40 photographs of people in emotionally charged situations (Dziobek et al., 2008), and has been described in detail elsewhere (Preller et al., 2014). The stimuli depict everyday life situations conveying information on emotional mental states via facial expression, body language, and context. Via distinct questions, which are answered on visual analogue scales, cognitive empathy (CE), explicit emotional empathy (EEE), and implicit emotional empathy (IEE) are measured (for details see Supplementary Material).

2.3.6. Movie for the assessment of social cognition

The Movie for the Assessment of Social Cognition (MASC) is an ecologically valid, video-based test of social cognition (Dziobek et al., 2006), which we implemented at $t + 105$ min. It has also been described in detail elsewhere (Preller et al., 2014). Participants had to watch a 15-min movie and make inferences about the video characters' mental states requiring the understanding of emotions, thoughts, and intentions, and concepts such as false belief, faux pas, metaphor, and sarcasm in an everyday-life situation, which are measured by Theory-of-Mind-related multiple-choice questions (for details see Supplementary material).

2.3.7. Cognitive tests

To study acute GHB effects on visual working memory and reaction time subjects had to perform the Delayed Matching to Sample (DMS, $t + 28$ min) and the Reaction Time (RTI, $t + 52$ min) tests from the Cambridge Neuropsychological Test Automated Battery (CANTAB, Cambridge Cognition, Cambridge, UK). In order to assess immediate ($t + 25$ min) and delayed verbal recall ($t + 57$ min), we employed a shortened German version of the Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test (RAVLT) (Helmstaedter et al., 2001), as GHB has a short half-life of 45 min (Abanades et al., 2006). Details of these tasks are reported in the Supplementary material.

2.3.8. Endocrine parameters and pharmacokinetics of GHB

We performed blood sampling at -20 , $+35$, $+60$, $+100$, $+135$, and $+190$ min to generate plasma. We determined plasma concentrations of GHB using gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) according to Meyer et al. (2011) with some modifications; and testosterone, progesterone, DHEA, cortisol, and aldosterone using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) according to (Gachet et al., 2014). Oxytocin levels were measured according to procedures established previously (Neumann et al., 2013). For details see Supplementary material.

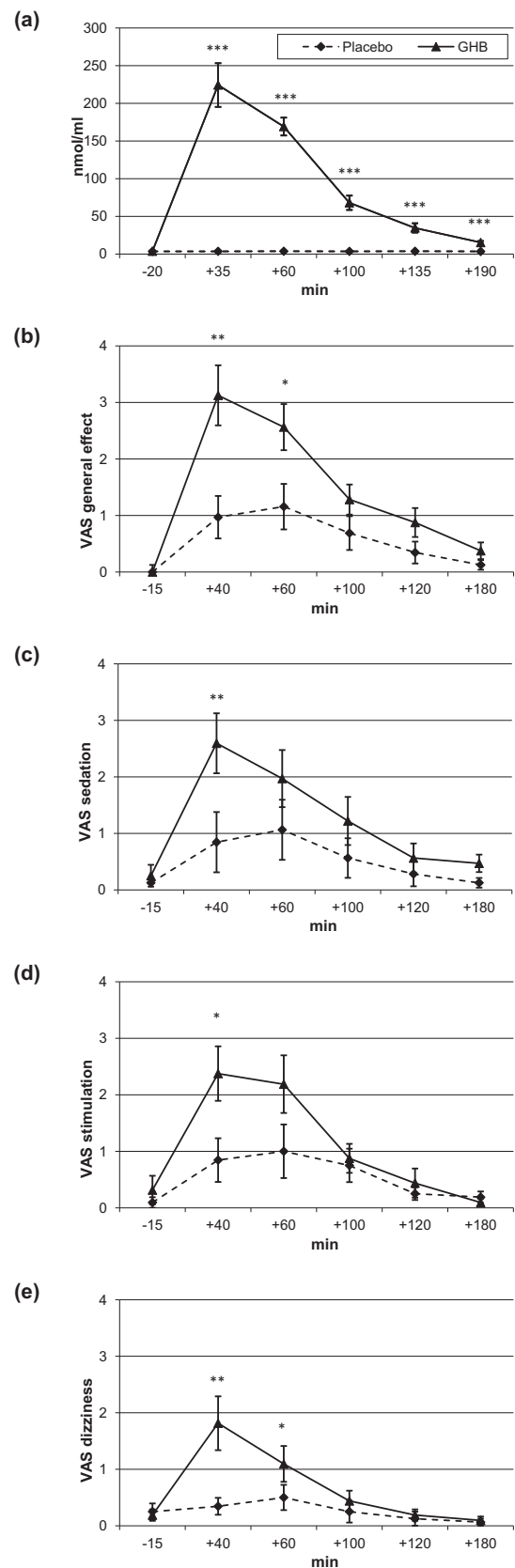


Fig. 1. GHB plasma (means and SEM) concentration (a), and visual analogue scales (VAS) general drug effect (b), sedation (c), stimulation (d), and dizziness (e) after GHB and placebo administration. Paired t -tests: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

2.4. Statistical analysis

All data were analyzed using SPSS® 22.0 for Windows. GHB and hormone plasma levels were plotted against time and areas under the curve (AUC) were calculated using the trapezoid rule. Demographic and neuropsychological test data were analyzed by paired *t*-tests. For the analyses of VAS and GSQ scales as well as GHB and hormone plasma levels, repeated measures ANOVA with drug (2-fold: GHB vs. placebo) and time (GSQ items: 3-fold; oxytocin and ACTH: 4-fold; VAS scales, GHB, and all other hormones: 6-fold) as within-subject factors were applied. Greenhouse-Geisser correction and adjusted *p*-values were used in models with more than one degree of freedom in the numerator. Paired *t*-tests were applied for post hoc treatment comparisons (placebo vs. GHB). All confirmatory statistical comparisons were carried out at a significance level of $p < .05$ (two-tailed). Finally, because of the small sample size, Spearman's rho was used for correlation analysis. Here, the significance level was set at $p < .01$ (two-tailed) to avoid accumulation of alpha-error.

3. Results

3.1. GHB plasma levels and subjective effects measured by VAS

GHB reached peak plasma concentration at $t + 35$ min and dropped back to close to the physiological level at $t + 190$ min (Fig. 1a). A drug $\times$ time (2×6) ANOVA showed significant main effects for drug ($F(1,15) = 104.0$, $p < 10^{-7}$), time ($F(5,11) = 55.9$, $p < 10^{-7}$), and a significant drug $\times$ time interaction ($F(5,11) = 55.7$, $p < 10^{-7}$), reflecting supraphysiological GHB levels after GHB intake and the time-course of the pharmacokinetic of the drug.

Under GHB, the general drug and sedative effects peaked at $t + 40$ min and vanished at 180 min post intake (Fig. 1b and c). Interestingly, subjects rated the effect of GHB as sedating and stimulating at the same time (Fig. 1c and d). Stimulation and dizziness induced by GHB peaked at $t + 40$ min but reached placebo levels already at $t + 100$ min (Fig. 1d and e). In drug $\times$ time (2×6) ANOVAs, all four VAS scales showed significant time effects ($F(5,11) = 10.4$ – 21.5 , $p < .0001$). With exception of the stimulation scale all other scales revealed significant drug effects ($F(1,15) = 4.0$ – 7.3 , $p < .05$) and significant drug $\times$ time interactions ($F(5,11) = 3.4$ – 7.2 , $p < .05$ – $.01$).

3.2. GHB specific questionnaire (GSQ)

Drug $\times$ time (2×6) ANOVAs revealed significant drug $\times$ time interactions for the items disinhibition, euphoria, and the tendency to talk (for the items disinhibition, euphoria, and the tendency to talk ($F(5,11) = 3.3$ – 7.7 , $p < .05$ – $.01$), a significant drug effect for the item vitality ($F(1,15) = 9.0$, $p < .01$) (Fig. 2a–c), and significant time effects for disinhibition, euphoria, increased sexuality, silliness, happiness, tendency to talk, vitality, and increased sensitivity to sound ($F(5,11) = 3.0$ – 15.4 , $p < .05$ – $.001$) (Fig. 2a–c, Supplementary Fig. 2a–d). Taken together, 20 mg/kg GHB induced an affective state that resembles hypomania.

3.3. Charity donation task, social value orientation, and reciprocity task

To avoid ceiling effects, two highly prosocial subjects who already spend the maximum of 40CHF under placebo and did not change under GHB were excluded from the analysis of the Charity Donation Task. Under GHB, subjects donated significantly more (+5.36CHF) than under placebo ($t(13) = -2.3$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.60$) (Fig. 3a). Moreover, under GHB, subjects also tended to enjoy their donation more (rating range 1–7 [mean $\pm$ SD]: placebo: 3.1 ± 2.7 , GHB: 3.8 ± 2.4 ; $t(13) = -1.7$, $p = .11$, $d = .46$) and reported that the

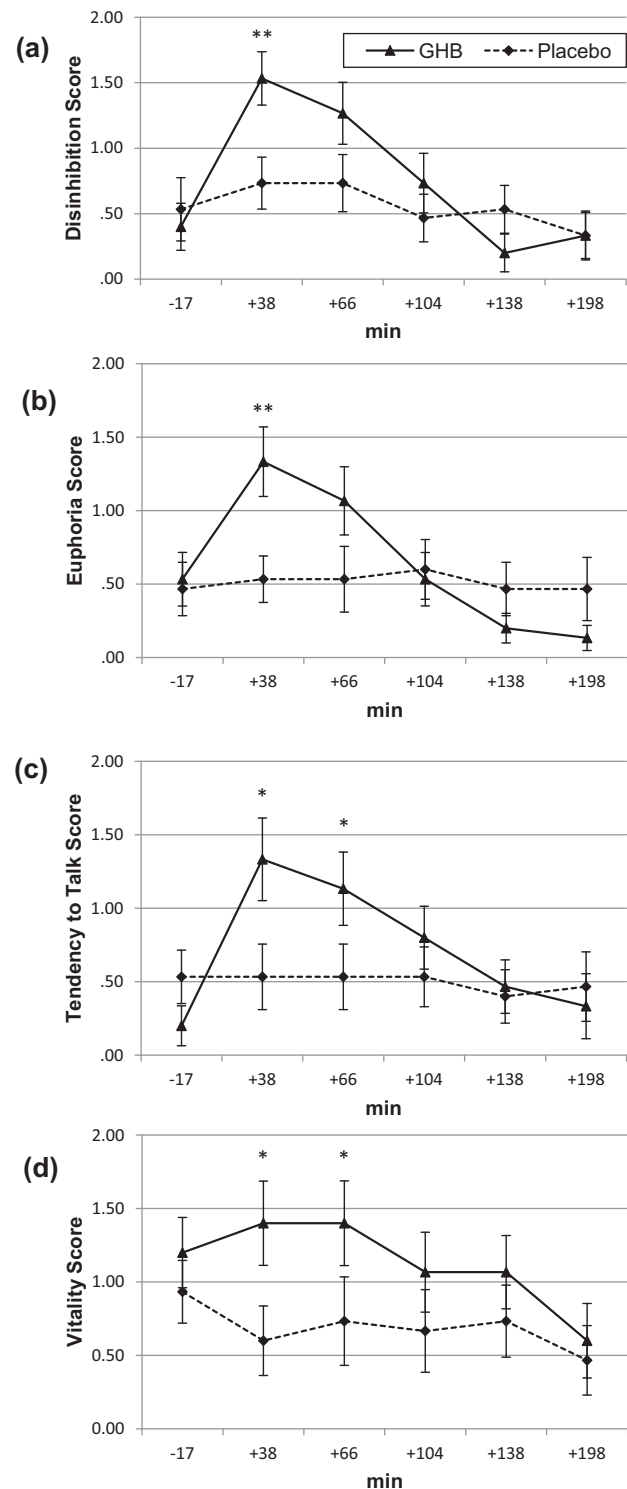


Fig. 2. Baseline corrected ratings (means and SEM) of the items disinhibition (a), euphoria (b), tendency to talk (c) and vitality (d) of the GHB specific questionnaire (GSQ). The values represent changescores from baseline ($t - 10$ min) on the respective test day. Paired *t*-tests: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

charity deserved the donation more strongly (placebo: 3.5 ± 2.9 , GHB: 4.7 ± 2.7 ; $t(13) = -1.9$, $p = .08$, $d = .52$). Pleasure of donation was positively correlated with GHB plasma concentration at $t + 100$ min (the task was done between $t + 60$ and $t + 100$ min; $r = .60$, $p < .01$), indicating that pleasure of donation increased with GHB plasma levels.

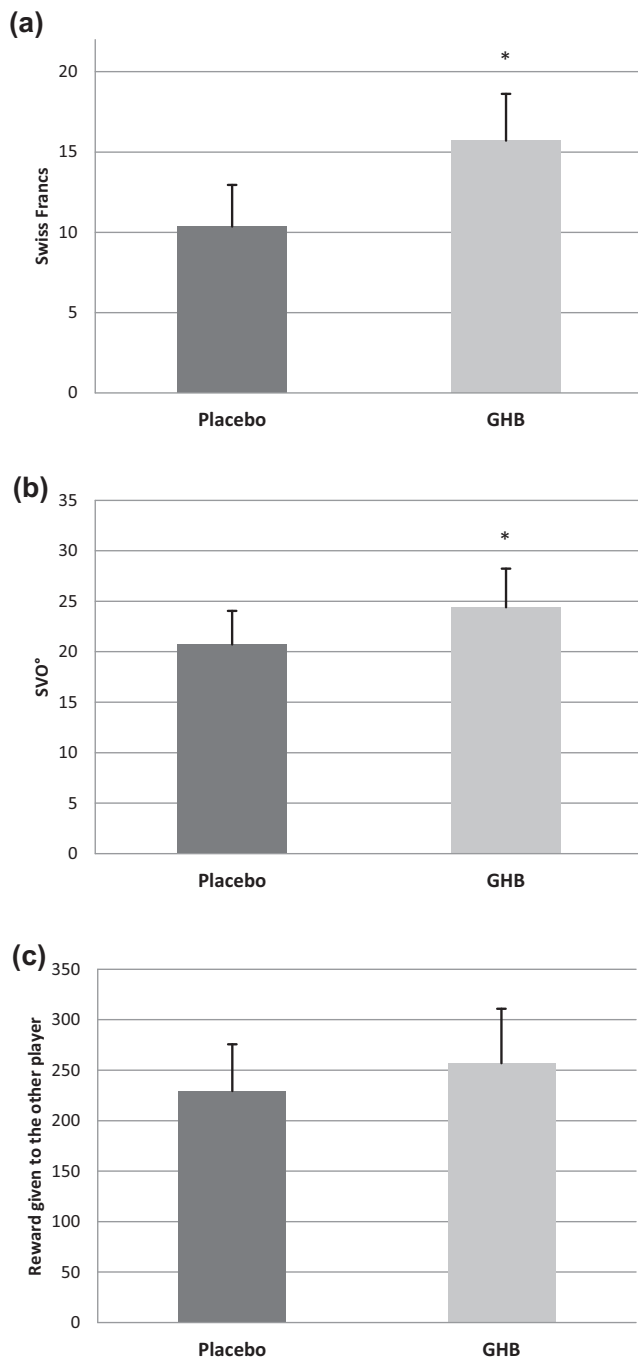


Fig. 3. Prosocial behavior measures under GHB and placebo (means and SEM): Money donated in the Charity Donation Task (a), and Social Value Orientation (SVO) angle (b), and points given to the other player in the Reciprocity Task (c). Paired *t*-tests: **p* < .05.

For the analysis of the SVO task four subjects were excluded as they displayed an SVO° of >40° in the placebo condition, indicating highly prosocial behavior already at baseline with little chance to be further enhanced. In the GHB condition subjects displayed a significantly wider SVO° compared to placebo ($t(11) = -2.2$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.62$), reflecting a preference for prosocial resource allocations (Fig. 3b).

In the analysis of the reciprocity task, one highly prosocial subject spending more than 500 points under placebo was excluded as no further improvement was expected. Post-acutely ($t + 160$ min), GHB administration was associated with slightly elevated positive reciprocity but the effect was far from being significant

($t(14) = -.60$, $p = .56$, $d = .15$) (Fig. 3c). Interestingly, under placebo the reward given to the other player was not significantly correlated with the feeling of pleasure when being prosocial ($r = -.30$, $p = .29$), whereas under GHB the reward given and the pleasure of giving were correlated ($r = -.65$, $p = .008$) (Supplementary Fig. 3). When we considered the order of placebo and GHB administration in repeated measures ANOVAs with drug as within-subject factor and order as between-subject factor, the results remained unchanged.

3.4. Multifaceted empathy task and movie for the assessment of social cognition

GHB showed no effect on cognitive and emotional empathy in the MET. Furthermore, there was no significant drug effect on mental perspective-taking measured with the MASC (Table 1).

3.5. Reaction time and memory

At this moderate dose, GHB neither affected reaction and movement time nor verbal or visual memory performance (Table 1). Thus, the prosocial effects are likely not explained by cognitive effects or increased motor impulsivity.

3.6. Neuroendocrinology

In order to control for potential hormonal baseline differences between test days, hormone levels corrected for baseline levels ($t - 20$ min) were analyzed additionally to the uncorrected values (Fig. 4a and b; Supplementary Fig. 4). Drug $\times$ time ($2 \times 4 - 6$) repeated measures ANOVAs revealed significant time effects for progesterone (Fig. 4a and b), testosterone, aldosterone, and cortisol ($F(5,11) = 3.7 - 21.7$, $p < .05 - .001$) (Supplementary Fig. 4c–f), reflecting well-known circadian changes of these steroids. For baseline-corrected progesterone, we found a significant drug effect ($F(1,15) = 3.4$, $p < .05$), indicating increased progesterone release under GHB, which was significant at +100 min in the post hoc test (Fig. 4a). In the analysis of AUCs, baseline-corrected progesterone levels showed similar effects (here with moderate effect sizes), pointing to an increase of progesterone under GHB (Table 2).

GHB plasma levels at +135 min were correlated with progesterone change scores at 135 min ($r = .69$, $p < .01$) and with AUC change scores ($r = .73$, $p < .001$). We did not observe any significant correlations between progesterone plasma levels and subjective drug effects or behavioral task performance within the GHB condition. We also did not observe significant effects of progesterone change scores [GHB minus placebo] and subjective and behavioral outcomes. Interestingly however, we found that low progesterone levels at baseline ($t - 20$ min) were predictive of donation effects in the charity donation task ($r = -.65$, $p < .01$) and the SVO° ($r = -.65$, $p < .01$), indicating that GHB provoked prosocial behavior specifically in individuals with low progesterone levels.

4. Discussion

In this study, GHB enhanced mood and induced prosocial effects in humans which were paralleled by increased progesterone plasma levels. Contrary to our hypothesis, GHB did neither alter empathy or mental perspective-taking nor plasma levels of oxytocin, testosterone, cortisol, ACTH and aldosterone.

Surprisingly, the quality of subjective effects showed a simultaneous, mixed stimulating-sedating pattern. The sedating, stimulating, and general drug effects both peaked at 40 min. While the stimulating effects had returned to placebo levels already after 100 min, the general and sedating effects lasted until 180 min

Table 1
Neuropsychological test performance under placebo and GHB (means and SD). MASC: movie for the assessment of social cognition, MET: multifaceted empathy test, RTI: reaction time (CANTAB), DMS: delayed matching to sample (CANTAB), RAVLT: rey auditory verbal learning test.

		Placebo	GHB	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	Cohens <i>dz</i>
MASC ^a	Correct answers (sum)	34.9 (3.6)	33.6 (3.9)	1.67	13	0.12	0.45
	Correct control items (sum)	4.6 (1.2)	4.9 (0.9)	-1.59	13	0.14	0.42
	Recognition of emotions (%)	73.3 (14.3)	71.4 (14.2)	0.59	13	0.57	0.16
	Recognition of thoughts (%)	85.7 (18.9)	76.8 (20.7)	1.44	13	0.17	0.38
	Recognition of intentions (%)	71.9 (10.2)	72.4 (6.3)	-0.14	13	0.89	0.04
MET	Cognitive empathy (correct items)	25.0 (4.5)	24.3 (4.5)	0.75	15	0.47	0.19
	Explicit emotional empathy (mean rating)	5.1 (1.3)	5.0 (1.4)	0.67	15	0.51	0.17
	Implicit emotional empathy (mean rating)	4.5 (1.3)	4.5 (1.5)	-0.04	15	0.97	0.01
	Mean reaction time (ms)	3965 (1053)	3728 (682)	0.84	15	0.41	0.21
RTI	Simple reaction time (ms)	275 (43.4)	276 (47.7)	-0.08	15	0.94	0.02
	Simple movement time (ms)	279 (64.9)	280 (71.9)	-0.24	15	0.82	0.06
	Simple accuracy (score)	14.6 (1.1)	14.7 (0.7)	-0.37	15	0.72	0.09
	5-choice reaction time (ms)	301 (49.7)	299 (49.7)	0.38	15	0.71	0.09
	5-choice movement time (ms)	282 (65.5)	279 (69.1)	0.69	15	0.50	0.19
	5-choice accuracy score (score)	14.9 (0.3)	14.6 (1.1)	0.89	15	0.39	0.28
DMS	Correct simultaneous (sum)	4.8 (0.5)	4.9 (0.3)	-0.81	15	0.43	0.20
	Correct all delays (sum)	13.1 (1.5)	13.2 (1.7)	-0.10	15	0.92	0.02
RAVLT	Immediate recall (number of words)	9.3 (1.9)	10.1 (2.4)	-1.65	15	0.13	0.41
	Delayed recall (number of words)	7.1 (2.1)	7.8 (2.5)	-1.55	15	0.14	0.39
	Recognition (p(A))	0.88 (0.1)	0.90 (0.1)	-0.65	15	0.52	0.16

^a Due to technical problems with the MASC, only data from 14 subjects were available.

post intake, corresponding to the time-course of GHB plasma concentrations. This stands in contrast to a previous study which examined much higher doses of GHB (40–72 mg/kg) reporting a temporally separated mixed stimulant-sedative pattern. The pattern was biphasic with initial stimulation (peak at minute 45 p.i.) and following sedation (peak at minute 60–90 p.i.) (Abanades et al., 2006). In contrast, our dose induced a state with both qualities at the same time, albeit showing more enduring general and sedating effects compared to stimulation (Fig. 1c and d). These differing time-courses seem attributable to divergent dose-dependent receptor activation patterns. It has been suggested that lower doses disinhibit thalamocortical neurons and neurons in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) via agonism at presynaptic GABA_B receptors and simultaneously inhibit these neurons via postsynaptic GABA_B receptors, while higher doses additionally involve G protein-gated inwardly rectifying potassium (GIRK) channels, leading to a delayed and more intense neuronal hyperpolarization (Luscher and Slesinger, 2010). Consequently, simultaneous stimulating and sedating effects would be expected at lower doses, while a dissociation of these effects with increased sedation at later time points would be expected at higher doses of the drug.

GHB enhanced mood in our subjects, eliciting an affective state that resembled hypomania, including disinhibition, euphoria, increased vitality, and enhanced tendency to talk. Mood alteration,

either as induction of euphoria or self-treatment of depression symptoms, was reported as a motivation of illicit GHB use (Sumnall et al., 2008). Potential antidepressant effects of the drug were reported in animal models (Zerbib et al., 1992) and early clinical studies (Tanaka et al., 1966; Rinaldi et al., 1967), but never evaluated in-depth according to present clinical trial standards. Consequently, the mood alteration in healthy subjects might be an indicator for a putative therapeutic effect in depressed patients, which we recently proposed because of the unique clinical and pharmacological profile of GHB (Bosch et al., 2012).

At the behavioral level, GHB induced prosociality mostly in participants who showed low to moderate prosocial behavior under placebo. First, the drug increased the willingness to donate money in a charity donation task. Moreover, by trend, GHB increased the pleasure associated with donating money and reinforced the belief that the charity deserved the donation more strongly. This may be interpreted as an increase in altruism, which is conceptualized as giving up a value with no expectation of compensation. Interestingly, depressed patients show various impairments during social interactions, including both increased (Pulcu et al., 2014) and reduced altruism (Zhang et al., 2012). While depression-related hyper-altruism was attributed to excessive feelings of guilt (Pulcu et al., 2014), increased altruism in our study participants appears to be rather pleasure- and compassion-related. Furthermore, GHB

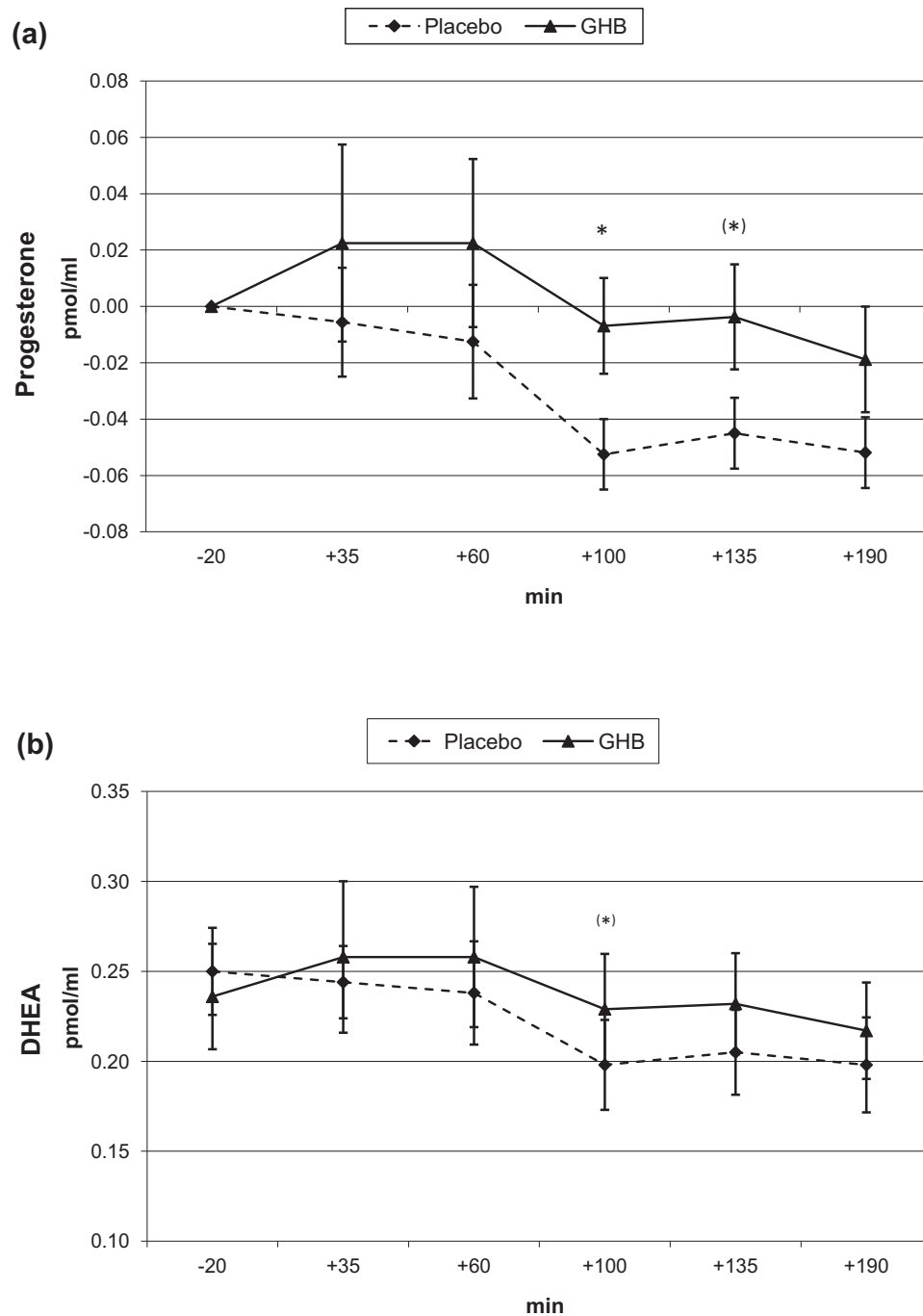


Fig. 4. Progesterone plasma concentrations (means and SEM) corrected for individual baseline (–20 min) levels on each test day (a) and baseline-corrected DHEA plasma levels (b). Paired *t*-tests: **p* < .10, **p* < .05.

induced a tendency towards prosocial money distributions in our Social Value Orientation (SVO) task, reflecting an increased preference for fairness. Although SVO is commonly viewed as a personality trait, it is also susceptible to pharmacological modulations as shown in drug challenge studies using MDMA (Hysek et al., 2014).

Finally, positive reciprocity was only slightly increased in the post-acute phase without reaching significance, but subjects again experienced significantly more pleasure during prosocial decisions. This might be in line with the so called “warm glow” hypothesis assuming that individuals experience pleasure during prosocial behavior, an effect which has been linked to activity of the mesolimbic reward system (Phan et al., 2010). GHB seems to have effects

on mesocorticolimbic dopaminergic pathways, which are controversially discussed, as the drug has both addictive and anti-craving properties (Keating, 2014). A recent translational model described an enhancement of mesolimbic pathway activity after GHB intake, resulting from a converging disinhibition of dopaminergic projections from the VTA to the nucleus accumbens and prefrontal cortex (Snead and Gibson, 2005). In this regard, the GHB-induced prosociality might be the behavioral correlate of a disinhibited mesolimbic reward system, which increases the sensitivity for hedonia-associated cues. As reaction time and memory performance remained unaffected by the drug, general impairment of task performance as a reason for increased prosociality can be ruled out. Considering the relatively short half-life of GHB of about

Table 2
Area under the curve (AUC) of hormones under placebo and GHB (means and SD). ACTH: adrenocorticotrophic hormone, AUC: area under the curve, corr: corrected, DHEA: dehydroepiandrosterone.

	Placebo	GHB	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	Cohens <i>dz</i>
ACTH AUC	132.4	133.0	−0.07	14	0.95	0.02
(4 time points)	(41.2)	(34.4)				
ACTH.corr AUC	−44.0	−15.0	−0.94	14	0.36	0.24
(4 time points)	(109.4)	(44.5)				
Oxytocin AUC	46.0	32.3	1.53	14	0.15	0.40
(4 time points)	(53.5)	(30.7)				
Oxytocin.corr AUC	−7.0	−2.7	−0.18	14	0.86	0.05
(4 time points)	(84.7)	(45.3)				
Testosterone AUC	72.3	74.5	−0.75	15	0.47	0.19
(6 time points)	(14.8)	(19.1)				
Testosterone.corr AUC	3.7	2.6	0.63	15	0.54	0.16
(6 time points)	(6.7)	(8.9)				
Progesterone AUC	1.11	1.20	−0.88	15	0.39	0.22
(6 time points)	(0.44)	(0.63)				
Progesterone.corr AUC	−0.14	0.03	−1.81	15	0.09	0.45
(6 time points)	(0.22)	(0.40)				
Aldosterone AUC	32.8	32.0	0.68	15	0.51	0.17
(6 time points)	(7.0)	(5.1)				
Aldosterone.corr AUC	−7.7	−9.1	0.78	15	0.45	0.20
(6 time points)	(5.7)	(8.0)				
DHEA AUC	151.0	161.4	−1.52	15	0.15	0.38
(6 time points)	(33.9)	(44.3)				
DHEA.corr AUC	−1.0	−15.8	1.71	15	0.11	0.43
(6 time points)	(16.2)	(35.6)				
Cortisol AUC	1164.5	1192.7	−0.32	15	0.76	0.08
(6 time points)	(311.8)	(375.7)				
Cortisol.corr AUC	−392.3	−519.2	1.03	15	0.32	0.26
(6 time points)	(408.8)	(464.8)				

40 min (Abanades et al., 2006), together with the plasma concentration curve assessed in our subjects (Fig. 1), it is possible that the decreasing GHB concentrations might explain the decreasing prosocial effects across tasks (Charity Donation > SVO > Reciprocity task).

Currently, there are only few pharmacologic compounds with documented prosocial activity. In several studies, oxytocin was shown to facilitate prosocial behavior including increased charity donations (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2011). Recently, MDMA was shown to have empathy-enhancing and prosocial effects, which were paralleled by an increase of oxytocin plasma levels (Schmid et al., 2014). In contrast, in another study with MDMA-experienced individuals, the drug enhanced emotional empathy, while cognitive empathy, trust and reciprocity remained unaffected. Interestingly, neither oxytocin plasma levels nor exogenously applied oxytocin affected those measures (Kuypers et al., 2014). GHBs' most widespread street name is "liquid ecstasy", as it is reported to share MDMA's empathogenic and prosocial effects (Uys and Niesink, 2005). However, both drugs differ strongly regarding their pharmacodynamic profile. While MDMA is a serotonin and noradrenalin releaser, the pharmacological effects of GHB are primarily mediated by GABA_B receptor stimulation and secondary dopaminergic modulation (Uys and Niesink, 2005), or yet unknown mechanisms. Contrary to MDMA (Hysek et al., 2014; Schmid et al., 2014), GHB had neither empathogenic effects such as increasing complex emotion recognition, emotional empathy, and mental perspective-taking in our social cognition tasks, nor were oxytocin plasma levels affected in our study. However, as oxytocin plasma levels do not fully reflect central oxytocin release (Neumann, 2007), and GHB was shown to up-regulate hypothalamic oxytocin mRNA in rats (van Nieuwenhuijzen et al., 2010), at least centrally restricted involvement of oxytocin regarding the prosocial effects of GHB cannot be ruled out. Four reasons led to our hypothesis that the androgen system might be involved in the prosocial effects of GHB: the drug seems to enhance sexually connoted affiliative behavior, alters levels of several steroid hormones, GABA_B receptors are discussed in the regulation of testosterone secretion (Amikishieva, 2007), and

testosterone is a sex steroid hormone that might be a mediator of prosocial effects (Eisenegger et al., 2010). However, we did not observe any alterations of testosterone (and DHEA) levels in our subjects and hence conclude that GHB-related prosocial effects do not operate via the androgen system.

Interestingly, GHB-induced neuroendocrine changes were limited to an increase in progesterone release here. Progesterone is a steroid hormone primarily synthesized in the testicles and the adrenal glands in males. However, small amounts are also synthesized in the brain, there targeting and influencing neuronal activity, which qualifies it as a neurosteroid (Guenoun et al., 2015). Animal and human data show that progesterone release mirrors an individual's level of social affiliative motivation (Frye et al., 2000; Maner et al., 2010). For example, affiliative behavior of female rats is most pronounced, when progesterone release peaks during the estrous cycle (Frye et al., 2000). In humans, the desire to affiliate with others correlates positively with basal progesterone levels (Wirth and Schultheiss, 2006), and endogenous fluctuations of the hormone reflect fluctuations of female social-affiliative motivations during the menstrual cycle (Schultheiss et al., 2003). Moreover, interpersonal closeness increased salivary progesterone in a sample of 160 female college students, which predicted altruistic motivations one week later (Brown et al., 2009). Finally, in subjects with high rejection sensitivity, experimental social rejection can lead to heightened progesterone release when given an opportunity to reaffiliate, which might reflect a desire for compensatory closeness (Maner et al., 2010). These studies support the notion that progesterone release might be a neuroendocrine mechanism that contributes to the prosocial effects of GHB. Although, we did not find direct correlations of progesterone levels and behavioral parameters, which might be due to the small sample size, our finding that GHB provoked prosocial behavior specifically in individuals with low progesterone levels strongly supports this relationship.

Moreover, progesterone is a precursor of the other neurosteroids tetrahydroprogesterone (3 α , 5 α -THP) and tetrahydrodeoxycorticosterone (THDOC), which are both GABA_A receptor agonists and studied as experimental therapeutics in stress-related

disorders such as anxiety and depression (Zorumski et al., 2013). In animals, GHB leads to a dose-dependent increase of progesterone, 3 α , 5 α -THP and THDOC in the central nervous system, which significantly contribute to the sedative effects of the drug (Barbaccia et al., 2005). Moreover, central and peripheral increase of neurosteroid plasma levels were closely related (Barbaccia, 2004), thus implicating increased progesterone concentration to be a relevant marker of central neurosteroidogenesis.

Another clinical aspect arises regarding GHB-induced progesterone release: GHB is used for the treatment of alcohol withdrawal and as an anti-craving agent (Keating, 2014), while some studies also point to anti-craving and relapse preventing effects of progesterone in nicotine (Lynch and Sofuoglu, 2010) and cocaine addiction (Yonkers et al., 2014). Therefore, increased progesterone release might contribute to the therapeutic effect of GHB in alcohol withdrawal and abstinence maintenance.

In our subjects, stress hormones such as ACTH, cortisol, and aldosterone plasma levels remained unchanged. Previous studies indicate bidirectional effects of GHB on stress hormone release, depending on the initial activity of the HPA axis: increase at rest (Van Cauter et al., 1997), reduction in stressful conditions (Nava et al., 2007). The fact that stress hormone concentrations were not increased under placebo suggests that our participants performed the tasks within a psychophysiological balanced experimental setting.

Nevertheless, the present study has some limitations. First, we only report a single dose of GHB (20 mg/kg). However, when we evaluated a higher dose (35 mg/kg) we observed intense sedative effects and induction of nausea in several subjects, which strongly impaired test performance. Second, GHB is likely a “dirty drug”, acting on distinct neurotransmitter and neuroendocrine systems, thus complicating the interpretation of the results at a molecular level. Third, due to small sample size, the prosocial effects but also the lack of effect in some hormones and tasks have to be considered as preliminary and should be replicated in larger studies. Fourthly, we included only male subjects to avoid controlling for hormonal fluctuations due to menstrual cycle in women.

In summary, the primary finding of this study is that GHB enhances mood and induces prosocial behavior in healthy subjects paralleled by an increase in progesterone release but without affecting oxytocin and testosterone plasma levels. The study thus confirms recreational GHB users' self-reported effects on prosociality on an objective, experimental level. Mood enhancement and potentially increased neurosteroidogenesis make GHB an interesting experimental therapeutic agent to treat forms of depression and anxiety. On the other hand, the prosociality observed may be elicited by a direct activation of the mesolimbic reward system due to GHB- and/or GABA_B receptor stimulation and/or indirectly due to increased progesterone secretion. Recently, arbaclofen, another GABA_B agonist with prosocial effects, has been suggested as new treatment for autism spectrum disorders (Insel, 2012). The clinical use of GHB as a means to improve interpersonal contact was noted early on in studies showing an improvement of patient-doctor alliance (Danon-Boileau et al., 1962). Thus, the prosocial compound GHB might be useful to increase social engagement in patients with autism spectrum disorders or depression.

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Authors contribution

O. G. Bosch – conception and design of the study; acquisition of data; analysis of data; drafting of the article; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

C. Eisenegger – conception and design of the study; analysis of data; interpretation of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

J. Gertsch – analysis of data; interpretation of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

D. Dornbierer – acquisition of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

M. S. Gachet – analysis of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

M. Heinrichs – conception and design of the study; interpretation of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

T. C. Wetter – conception and design of the study; analysis of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

E. Seifritz – conception and design of the study; interpretation of data; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

B. B. Quednow – conception and design of the study; analysis of data; interpretation of data; drafting of the article; revising the article, final approval of the version to be submitted.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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