



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

PSYCHIATRY ACADEMY

Psilocybin vs. MDMA: Similarities & Differences in Clinical Work

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Disclosures

I have received payments from Lykos Therapeutics (formerly MAPS-PBC) as a consultant and for training and supervising research therapists.



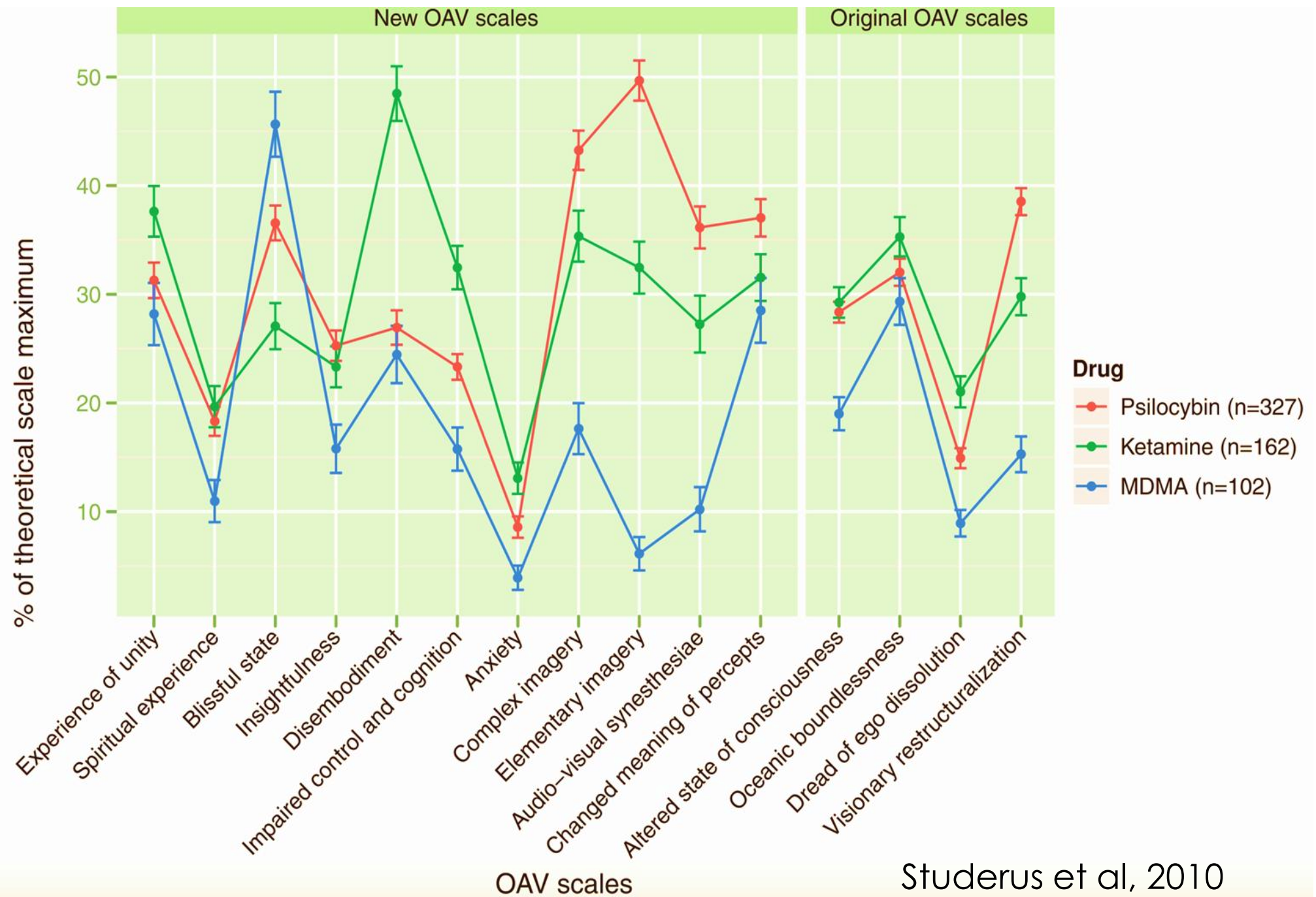
Caveats

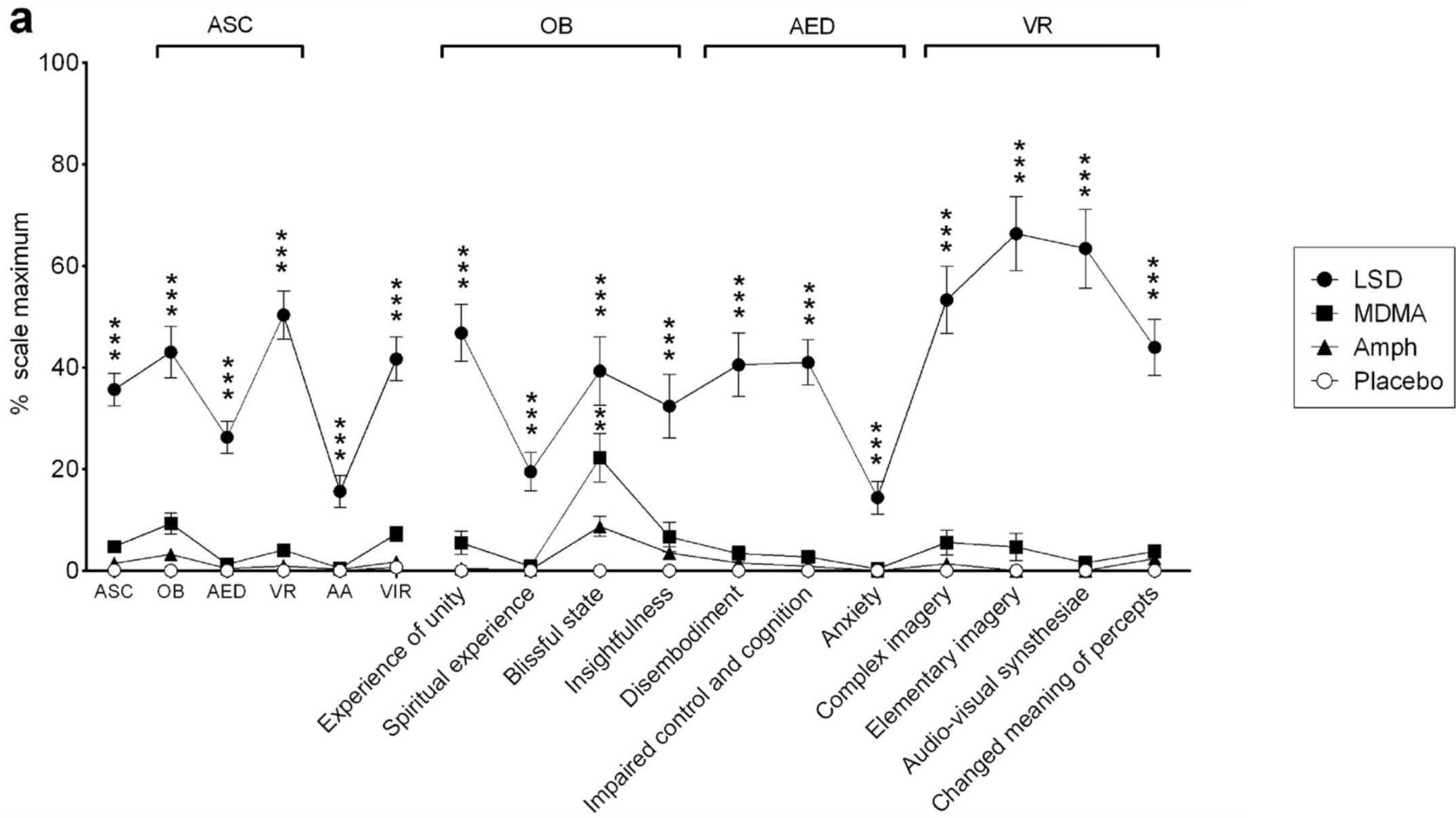
- 20 minutes \neq Time for Nuance
- Anecdote \neq Evidence
- Experience matters
 - Indigenous medicinal use
 - Earlier psychedelic researchers
 - Contemporary psychedelic practitioners



Classification & Context

- MDMA (~75–180 mg)
 - Entactogen - Producing an inner “touching”
 - Empathogen - Generating empathy
- Psilocybin (~10–35 mg)
 - Hallucinogen - Generating hallucinations
 - Entheogen - Generating the divine within







The Oversimplified Story

- Psilocybin
 - “Spiritual”
 - Mostly silent sessions
 - Facilitators are “monitors”
- MDMA
 - “Relational”
 - Lots of talking in sessions
 - Facilitators are psychotherapists



“Psychological Support”

- Similarities across studies and substances
 - Preparation sessions (~2-8h, over 1-4 weeks)
 - Dosing (~6-8h, 1-3 total, ~1-4 weeks apart)
 - Integration sessions (~2-8h, over 2-8 weeks)
- Caveats
 - Spotty reporting of clinical methods
 - Inconsistent protocols
 - Not a lot of research into the psychotherapy component of any stage

Horton et al, *Am J Psychother.* 2021
Brennan et al, *Psychedelic Med.* 2023
Aday et al, *Psychopharmacology.* 2024



Intention & Intentionality

- What is the clinical indication?
- What is the intention for the session?
- How is the therapist oriented to the patient and to the treatment?



Preparation

- Create a safe container for the dosing session
 - Trust, empathy, authenticity, respect
 - Establish boundaries
 - Share information
 - Establish (and manage) expectations
- Content: Indication- and drug-specific



Dosing Sessions: Context

- What is the intention for the session?
- What's the physical environment?
- What's the interpersonal environment?
- What's the clinical context and the theory of therapeutic action?
- How much time is spent verbally engaged?
- What kind of music is played?
- What is the dosing protocol?



MDMA

- Time generally more evenly divided between inner- and outward-oriented state
- Autobiographical content common in inner-oriented state
- Experience of multiplicity of the personal psyche is common
- Autobiographical *and* relational focus in outward-oriented state
- Initial anxiety, but often followed by feeling of safety
- Verbal exchange is in the service of deepening the internal process and working in/through the relationship



Psilocybin

- Sensory changes: often (but not always) visual at some point
- Autobiographical, symbolic/archetypal, mystical experiences
- Spiritual experiences, insights, and emotional breakthroughs are possible, but not guaranteed
- Doesn't inherently foster a sense of safety
- Verbal contact is primarily in the service of deepening the *internal* process
- Any kind of content (including traumatic) might emerge spontaneously

“Peak” Experiences

- Ego dissolution
- Boundlessness
- Unity, connection
- Euphoria, bliss
- Note that these experiences are not universal, and sessions may be very uncomfortable for the participant
 - A crash course in dealing with feelings of disappointment, regret, shame, and unworthiness”
 - “Nothing ever felt worse than those two hours”

Bogenschutz et al., 2018. *Frontiers Pharmacol.* 9:100.





Integration: Psilocybin

- Emphasis on exploring content and process of dosing session
- May include exploration of symbols, existential questions (and/or distress!), spiritual and emotional themes
- Therapists risk getting attached to certain images and interpretations, and/or idealizing the experience



Integration: MDMA (for PTSD)

- Emphasis on reprocessing and reframing (traumatic) memories
- Centers emotional, embodied experience of healing
- Uses the inner-directed and relational experiences of dosing day to continue the therapeutic work
- Therapists might be more active in reframing the trauma and guiding the processing, but risk rushing the participant's process



Frequent Themes

- Compassion (toward self, others)
- Forgiveness (of self, others)
- Grief
- New narratives - not defined by past
- In-session experiences providing a template for future inner and relational work



Final Notes

- Safety & Surrender
- Humanizing (MDMA) vs. spiritualizing (psilocybin) lens
- Emotional and relational resolution (MDMA) vs. meaning-making (psilocybin)
- Role of psychological flexibility in integration process
- Emotional suffering and breakthroughs are possible with both
- Set, setting, and dose affect any psychedelic experience
- Importance of strong relational ethics and beginner's mind



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Thank You!