

METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE FOR THE USE OF MDMA-ASSISTED PEACE CIRCLES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

This Methodological Guide presents an in-depth theoretical analysis of the intersection of community use of psychedelics, restorative justice, and conflict transformation, from an intersectional perspective. This document is divided into two sections. The first offers a theoretical review of the aforementioned paradigms. The second section presents a practical intervention framework, containing a set of guidelines for implementing and evaluating MDMA-assisted peace circles within the context of conflict transformation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community use of psychedelics. Beyond the interest in psychedelics as prescription medicines and the intensive process of medicalization they are undergoing, there is a clear interest in psychedelics within community settings, far from the cold environments of laboratories, clinical trial facilities, and psychiatrists' offices. In fact, the communal use of psychedelics is the norm, not the exception, in human history. In these communal settings, psychedelics serve not only as pharmacological tools but as catalysts for social reconnection, symbolic expression, ecological stewardship, and cultural continuity.ⁱ After our comprehensive research on the effects and characteristics of different psychedelic substances (such as ayahuasca, LSD or psilocybin), **we have selected MDMA as the most appropriate substance for the promotion of conflict transformation processes.**

MDMA has been defined as a “connectogen”,ⁱⁱ given that consistently facilitates connection across multiple domains -connection with the self (e.g., introspection, emotional insight), with others (e.g., empathy, bonding), with the body (e.g., tactile sensitivity), with the present moment, and sometimes with spiritual or transcendent dimensions. It could be argued that the primary psychological effect of MDMA is the **enhancement of social connection** -a multidimensional construct encompassing

feelings of interpersonal closeness, trust, empathy, compassion, and reduced social anxiety. MDMA temporarily shifts users into a "socially optimal state" characterized by heightened affiliative motivation and decreased social threat sensitivity. This state is thought to facilitate prosocial behavior, emotional disclosure, and the revision of maladaptive social beliefs, especially in therapeutic contexts. Rather than seeing MDMA's effects as diffuse or merely euphoric, social connection offers a unifying framework that accounts for the compound's emotional, cognitive, and relational outcomes across both recreational and clinical settings.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moreover, research on the long-term and social effects of recreational MDMA use has shown that users who took MDMA in intimate, safe, or spiritual settings -and with intentions related to introspection, emotional exploration, or interpersonal connection- were significantly more likely to report lasting positive changes, such as increased empathy, openness, and trust. These findings suggest that the perceived social effects of MDMA are not only acute and situational but may also consolidate over time when the experience is framed by meaningful interpersonal or self-reflective goals.^{iv}

MDMA's unique pharmacological profile -simultaneously dampening fear and defensiveness while enhancing empathy, trust, and emotional openness- makes it exceptionally well-suited to facilitate the repair and deepening of interpersonal bonds, particularly in contexts marked by division, trauma, or political pressure.^v In groups such as human rights activists under authoritative regimes, peace activists in conflicts such as Israel and Palestine or Ukraine, organizations seeking truth, justice, and reparation in Mexico or Colombia, among many others, where external forces may erode cohesion and mutual understanding, **MDMA could serve as a catalyst for restoring emotional openness, reaffirming shared values, and rebuilding trust.** By fostering a psychologically safe state in which individuals feel seen, heard, and emotionally connected, MDMA may help counteract the alienation and fragmentation induced by prolonged social or political conflict. Used with intention and care, **it has the potential not only to strengthen existing bonds but also to rehumanize relationships strained by fear and polarization.**

Restorative justice in the context of conflict transformation. This project will employ an innovative methodology—**MDMA-assisted peace circles**—with the aim of empowering pacifist organizations working on peacebuilding in situations of war or large-scale violent conflict. Our proposal is grounded in a position that arises from the convergence of two theoretical traditions: conflict transformation and restorative justice.

In the **conflict transformation** approach^{vi}, the main question is not "How do we end something not desired?" but rather "**How do we end something destructive and build something desired?**" This entails the need to work on medium- and long-term

strategies and, moreover, implies that before promoting negotiations between the conflicting parties, it is necessary to generate **platforms for change** within the civil society of each side. This does not mean rejecting immediate solutions to destructive situations, but rather understanding that they must be part of broader constructive change processes. The goal is to transform the foundations of an unjust situation from which the outbreak of violence has emerged. The conflict transformation perspective seeks to achieve lasting change and, therefore, peace must be rooted in social justice. This perspective pays special attention to **building just relationships and social structures through a radical respect for human rights and life**. This involves working toward change in the **personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of conflict**^{vii}.

Although it was born with the idea of being a new way of dealing with criminal conflicts^{viii}, **Restorative justice** can be also understood as paradigm that seeks conflict transformation^{ix} in situations crossed by systemic injustices and transgenerational trauma. Many projects have adapted the restorative approach to work on conflicts outside the penal system, including projects to promote peace processes in societies affected by large-scale violence or identity conflicts. It is precisely these latter experiences that inspire our intervention proposal. Specifically, restorative justice has been successfully applied in response to serious conflict contexts in the Basque Country^x, Northern Ireland^{xi}, and Israel and Palestine^{xii}, among other places. We conceived **Restorative justice as an approach capable of building a pluralist society at peace with itself, in which identity is multidimensional and not a source of violent conflict**^{xiii}. Our restorative intervention, within the framework of conflict transformation, aims to create safe spaces in which to hold difficult conversations in contexts where serious and unjust harm has occurred—and continues to occur—in order to **heal those wounds and improve the relationships** among those living in such contexts.

Grounded in the values of respect for the dignity of all people and the interdependence that defines human beings, we will use MDMA-assisted peace circles^{xiv} **to transform emotions, bring frames of reference into convergence, and strengthen the cohesion of pacifist communities in settings of violent, asymmetric, and protracted conflict**. The core elements of restorative justice will allow us to create dialogical spaces aimed at making visible both obvious and hidden harms, as well as honoring the dignity of victims and of those who exercised violence and have chosen to change^{xv}.

An inclusive methodological perspective: Intersectionality as a tool to improve knowledge of community use of psychedelics for conflict transformation. Aware of the fundamental links between knowledge and power—links from which neither scientific production nor *peacebuilding* can escape—we find it important to incorporate

the tools provided by intersectionality into this research.^{xvi} Elements that shape the identity of individuals and collectives, such as **race, gender, class, nationality, or religion, must be taken into account in processes of conflict transformation**, and in the role of community use of psychedelics in these contexts. This combination has a critical impact on access to opportunities, the enjoyment of human rights, and, therefore, on the possibilities for social justice and sustainable peace.

Considerations of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality (among others) lie at the heart of many of today's social and political conflicts, and are often the foundational basis of violence perpetrated against specific social groups. Furthermore, the way in which conflict affects the lives and experiences of those who suffer it is determined by multiple categories: people do not belong to just one, but to many. In this context, intersectionality offers powerful tools not only for analysis but also for building inclusive knowledge. It undoubtedly creates a powerful opportunity to apply decolonial epistemologies.^{xvii}

The intersectional perspective helps us contextualize the role of gender and other markers of oppression both in the more complex dynamics of armed conflicts and in peacebuilding processes, and as such has been applied to the fields of international law and human rights.^{xviii} The field of psychedelic science has also been enriched by intersectionality. For example, research shows that the lack of participation by people of colour in empirical psychedelic studies partly explains the **gaps in understanding trauma experienced by certain communities—trauma that is deeply rooted in collective cultural and historical wounds, as well as in everyday racism and discrimination.**^{xix}

Intersectionality has to be incorporated gradually. Therefore, the first step is to include the people who will participate in the project already in the design phase, so that the project is grounded and refined within the specific context in which it will unfold. This means an intention and openness of co-design with the partner organizations, so that they can co-create and feel ownership of the aims, methodology and development of the entire process. Likewise, the aim is to achieve full inclusion (not merely symbolic) of communities and perspectives that have historically been discriminated against and silenced.^{xx} These are all structural conditions of the process, not just desires or objectives.

Conclusions. MDMA-assisted peace circles will involve generating transformation across this four levels: individual, relational, structural, and cultural. These levels of transformation symmetrically correspond to the elements our MDMA-assisted group intervention will impact: emotional openness occurs at the individual level, frame convergence is related to the predicted relational connection, group cohesion

generates structural changes, and increased community power is capable of fostering medium-term cultural change. Transformations at the individual, relational, structural, and cultural levels will result from changes in emotions, frames of reference, group cohesion, and power. Accordingly, MDMA-assisted peace circles will:

1. Improve the emotional well-being of individual participants. At the individual level, MDMA will enhance participants' psychological well-being by reducing levels of anxiety and fear, while increasing self-compassion, calmness, joy, and hope.

As we have seen, the proposed work is fundamentally group-based and will focus on the potential improvements that MDMA offers in relational interactions. However, every group is composed of individuals, and violent conflicts often affect the emotional well-being of the people involved. In fact, one of the goals of conflict transformation is to minimize the destructive effects of social conflict and maximize the potential for the growth and well-being of the person as an individual human being at the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels. At this individual level, we know that **MDMA will enhance endogenous healing processes by reducing fear and anxiety**. Once greater emotional stability is reached, participants will be able to engage in constructive dialogue on controversial issues.

2. Increase social connection and open the way for a convergence of frames. At the relational level, the unique properties of this psychedelic medicine will foster strong social connection, an understanding of mutual interdependence, and a sense of closeness and warmth toward others—dismantling barriers to open-hearted, authentic, and fluid communication that will **promote convergence of frames**. We believe the cooperative interactions generated by our intervention will help bring together frames of reference that expose the deeper roots of the conflict, including economic, racial, and gender-based injustices that exist even within the same side of the conflict.

Social connection is considered by many to be a fundamental human need and involves feeling understood, valued, and loved in the company of others. This connection is associated with ideas of belonging to the same group, closeness, compassion, empathy, and trust—all of which enable difficult conversations to take place in a constructive way. MDMA has received much attention as a catalyst for processes of social connection. Moreover, there is scientific evidence suggesting that MDMA may promote relatively more connection to in-group than out-group member^{xxi}, which means its use would be especially well-suited to support the intra-group work proposed here. **Greater social connection among the members of one or several pacifist organizations would allow these organizations to achieve a convergence of frames of reference.**

In addition, intra-group work aims to transform the conflict by increasing awareness of the real nature of the situation and the actual capacities for action of the groups involved in violent conflict. As some studies indicate, MDMA is capable of producing **greater insight into the problems and circumstances affecting a person or group**. This effect has sometimes been described as an illuminating capacity that fosters **deeper self-knowledge and understanding of the reality of a situation**. MDMA has been compared to a kind of magnifying glass or lens that allows the viewer to see even more – to make out things that are not accessible to their normal vision and would otherwise be hidden from their sight. What a person glimpses through a magnifying glass is not less real for being refracted through a lens^{xxii}.

This brings us to the most complex effect we aim to achieve with our intervention: a change in frame of reference, or reframing. A frame of reference is a set of mostly unconscious beliefs that give meaning to the conflict and to its possible solutions. Typically, conflicting parties have radically opposing frames of reference. Reframing can be defined as a process of critical reflection on one's own viewpoints, leading to collective learning. We believe that **MDMA, by fostering emotional well-being, increasing social connection, and producing deep insights into the conflict, will be capable of reframing a shared vision for a possible solution.**

3. Enable greater cooperation and increase group cohesion. We can say that group cohesion exists when a group of people shares a common frame of reference, with shared goals and interests, and decides to act cooperatively to achieve them. Sometimes, even when pacifist organizations agree on their goals (reducing violence, achieving peace), they are unable to agree on how to act and therefore fail to establish cooperative guidelines for working together. We believe that the potential for increased connection offered by MDMA will help to gain frame convergence and lower the barriers to cooperation. **This convergence will increase group cohesion, building a strong community united in its diversity**, and thereby also produce structural-level changes. Greater convergence among different perspectives on how to transform the conflict paves the way for strategic understanding among those who pursue similar goals but were previously unable to agree on acting together. In this way, MDMA-assisted peace circles will contribute to the cohesion of pacifist organizations, resulting in an expansion of their social base, gaining more power and, the possibility of constituting a platform for change.

4. Influence society and the international community on a large scale, laying the foundation for cultural change. Finally, this **cohesive group will have power to strive for a cultural change**. We could say that the deeper purpose of the intervention is to transform the ideological matrix of cruelty and replace it with a culture of care for life—a culture rooted in the very nature of being human. MDMA will allow us to gently

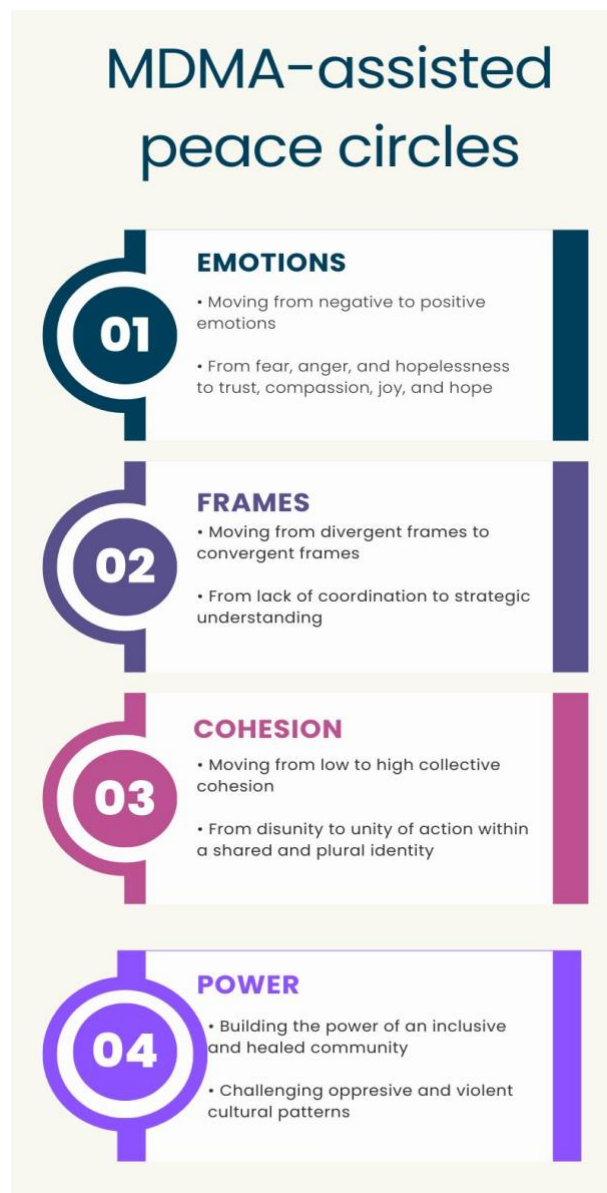
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A social innovation project conceived by JC Bouso, J Ollero and C Sánchez

nourish this longing to live in a truly human society. In the same direction, restorative justice will be the tool that enables us to create safe spaces for holding difficult conversations in contexts where serious and unjust harm has been inflicted—and continues to be inflicted.

Cultural change—a medium- and long-term goal—will occur if this intervention gives **rise to a societal shift away from the values of dehumanization and hatred, which feed on traumatic existential fears**. To achieve this, the results of the intervention will be made public in due time through communication campaigns, documentaries, or films designed to bring these values to the wider public. We believe that the use of such an innovative and powerful tool as **MDMA will attract global attention and help generate this much-needed cultural shift**.

In sum, our working hypothesis is **to use MDMA as a reframing tool to enable the collective empowerment of pacifist organizations**. Reframing will allow these organizations—already active in a particular conflict—to establish a shared diagnosis of the situation and of potential solutions. This reframing will enable mutual understanding about what to do and will, therefore, increase cohesion of the group, enhance internal power and serve as a platform for launching joint pacifist campaigns.



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INTERVENTION GUIDELINE

Our theoretical research offers a promising intervention strategy that seeks to generate processes of emotional change, enabling greater convergence of frameworks among peacebuilding organizations, increasing their cohesion and expanding their capacity to transform conflicts.

Structure of the intervention. The intervention will be structured in the form of three gatherings, which we have called the “Improbable Encounters.” Each of them will include a different number of participants and will have specific objectives. The first Encounter aims at improving emotional well-being and social connection among grassroots activists working on peacebuilding. The second is focused on achieving a convergence of frames of reference among grassroots peacebuilders. And the third Encounter aims to reach a larger number of civil society members, increasing empowerment and the promotion of cultural change. The Encounters will take place over 11-day periods (with MDMA-assisted peace circles in days 4 and 8), during which participants will explore difficult topics and reflect on the past, present, and future through various activities and interventions. Through these Encounters, we will strive to establish a platform for change that provokes transformations at the individual, relational, structural, and cultural levels, which will be evaluated through quantitative psychometric instruments and qualitative narrative tools. Each of these Encounters will be led by facilitators with experience in restorative justice and the therapeutic use of MDMA.

A summary of the possible generic structure of an Encounter would be the following:

Day 1. Welcome and Hospitality. Participants will be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the venue, the facilitators, and each other. The goal is to ensure they feel safe, welcomed, and trusting.

Day 2. Workshops and Group Cohesion Games. Interpersonal connection and group cohesion will be worked on through shared activities and cooperative workshops and games. This day will also be used to administer preliminary

questionnaires designed to address participants' core values, laying the groundwork for subsequent comparative analysis.

Day 3. Peace Circles: The Past (Memory). This session will begin work following the Peace Circle methodology^{xxiii}. A 3-4 hour circle will be held in the morning and a 3-4 hour circle in the afternoon. The main focus of this session will be the past of the conflict. The questions that will guide the discussion will revolve around topics such as memory, visible and hidden harms, the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the shared expression of pain experienced over the years.

Day 4. MDMA-Assisted Peace Circle: Re-evaluating the Past. The day will begin with a 2-hour peace circle in which the previous day's discussions will be recapitulated and the emotions experienced will be expressed. Subsequently, MDMA doses will be administered according to the established protocol. Participants will experience the effects of MDMA alone, listening to relaxing music and wearing masks, to promote concentration and mindfulness. The main administration will be followed by a booster after 2.5 hours. After 6 hours of the MDMA-assisted session, the day will close with a brief 1-hour circle to share the emotional state of the group.

Day 5. Integrating the Re-evaluation of the Past. In this session, the insights and emotional changes experienced the previous day will be processed and integrated. This will be done through individual sessions in the morning and a Peace Circle in the afternoon. Time will be allowed for reflection and individual rest.

Day 6. Inspirational Training Sessions. Restorative Walks. In the morning, a training workshop will be led by philosophers, artists, activists, or other experts who address inspiring topics for the participating organizations. The chosen topic will strive to be unconventional, opening imaginative and novel paths that foster unexpected connections between ideas and people. In the afternoon, a restorative walk will take place, exploring equally inspiring spaces for their natural, historical, or artistic connotations. Throughout the walk, explanations about the context of the places will be offered, and relaxed discussion will take place about what arises.

Day 7. Peace Circle: The Present (Perception). On this day, two 3-4 hour peace circles will be held, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The focus will be on the present situation, that is, how each person views the situation. Converging frames of reference will be identified and worked upon.

Day 8. MDMA-Assisted Peace Circle: Reassessing the Present. As on Day 4, the day will begin with a 2-hour peace circle to recap the previous day's discussions. MDMA doses will then be administered according to the established protocol. Participants will experience the effects of MDMA alone, listening to relaxing music and wearing masks to promote concentration and mindfulness. The main administration will be followed by a booster after 2.5 hours. After 6 hours of the MDMA-assisted

session, the day will close with a brief 1-hour circle to share the group's emotional state.

Day 9. Integration of the Reassessment of the Present. In this session, as in the session on day 5, the insights and emotional changes experienced the previous day will be processed and integrated. This will be done through individual sessions in the morning and a Peace Circle in the afternoon. Time will be set aside for reflection and individual rest.

Day 10. Peace Circle: The Future (Desire). On this day, two 3-4 hour peace circles will be held, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The focus will be on the desired future situation. The goal will be to imagine possible shared worlds in which identity is not experienced as a reason for conflict.

Day 11. Peace Circle: Designing Joint Strategies. On this day, a 3-4-hour Peace Circle will be held to discuss possible joint action strategies. We believe it will be possible to define common interests and goals, based on convergent frames of reference and the positive emotions elicited throughout the previous sessions. The afternoon will be spent completing the assessment questionnaires and sharing a brief closing Circle.

Assessment instruments. The assessment of the MDMA-assisted Peace Circles project will address the four levels of transformation described: individual, relational, structural, and cultural. To support this evaluation, we have conducted a review of the most relevant indicators and created a database containing both quantitative and qualitative tools. When the time comes for the assessment phase, we will select the most relevant and useful ones. These tools are offered as a flexible repertoire from which investigators may choose the most relevant instruments according to the specific aims, context, and resources of their subprojects. By allowing for tailored application, the evaluation strategy aims to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and feasibility. The items we would like to evaluate for each of the four levels of transformation include, among others: global psychological distress, and shifts in identity, meaning-making, and emotional integration (personal level); interpersonal trust in group settings, and narrative markers of connection, empathy, rupture, and repair (relational level); participants' evolving understanding of power, legitimacy, and their collective mission, and understanding of the structural dimensions of conflict (structural level); transformations in collective narratives over time, and evolution of symbolic repertoires and interpretative frames within a cultural or social context.

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