Four key members of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies joined the space of the Science and Justice working group to focus on the practices involved with bringing the psychedelic compound MDMA (more commonly known as ‘ecstasy’) to phase III drug trials for the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The meeting opened with a brief history of the MAPS mission in relation to MDMA related by by Josh Sonstroem (MAPS Director of Finance and IT). A tremendous controversy around MDMA emerged in the mid eighties. As therapists explored potential applications for the compound in therapeutic use, MDMA was also discovered by the party community, causing a political backlash that would ultimately lead to the drug becoming a Schedule I controlled substance, meaning it would be classified as having no medical use and a high potential for abuse. MAPS founder and director Rick Doblin thus began a 20 year battle to reassert the medical uses of MDMA. His efforts to bring therapists who had used the drug with therapeutic success were waylaid by studies funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) claiming that MDMA caused brain damage after only one use. Although these studies were later shown to be scientifically inaccurate in several ways, a tremendous amount of ground would have to be regained in order to reclassify the drug as medically valuable.

Valerie Mojeiko (MAPS Deputy Director and Leader of the Psychedelic Harm-Reduction Program) thus picked up the thread at this point to explain MAPS early positioning as a non-profit focused on public education. Beyond publishing and disseminating information about psychedelic research, MAPS began the Psychedelic Harm-Reduction Program with the Black Rock City Rangers, a volunteer group at the Burning Man Festival that focuses on mediating difficult situations, including uncomfortable psychedelic experiences. It was in this context that MAPS was first able to develop a form of psychedelic therapeutic practices.

Brad Burge (MAPS Communication and Education Associate) brought the discussion further along in history by explaining how the early Ricardi study, the one that claimed to show that MDMA has only-adverse effects, was ultimately overturned by later research. Burge also helped to explain how early NIDA-funded studies actually contained a tremendous amount of data that would be used to support MAPS’s argument that MDMA was safe for human use. While the presentational tone of these studies focused on the dangers of MDMA, the actual data they contained showed that MDMA did not
carry any lasting adverse effects. This elegant re-appropriation of scientific data produced by anti-MDMA groups would typify the MAPS strategy in future engagements.

Berra Yazar-Klosinski (MAPS Clinical Research Associate) followed up by providing an in-depth explanation of clinical practices employed in MAPS funded studies being carried out in North Carolina, Switzerland, Israel and Jordan. The crux of this explanation was to demonstrate that the measurement techniques employed by the FDA to test other compounds for the treatment of PTSD are tremendously well suited to MDMA therapy. In particular, the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS) very successfully demonstrates the value of three MDMA assisted therapy sessions for the treatment of PTSD. It is primarily these successes that have led MAPS to recently rebrand itself as a non-profit drug development organization. Berra also discussed the difficulties of applying the CAPS in the various languages and social milieus in which MDMA trials are being carried out. A tremendous amount of work still needs to be done to bring MDMA into mainstream medicine. Every year MAPS becomes more successful at addressing what needs to be accomplished and finding creative new ways to achieve their goals.

Members of the Science and Justice Workgroup then contributed comments, suggestions and critiques that might help MAPS members explore new possibilities for successful scientific practices. Jake Metcalf opened with questions about MAPS branding practices associated with their prospectus. In particular, Metcalf discussed the imagery used in the prospectus; the prospectus shows a variety of stock photos of ‘mainstream’ people such as soldiers and housewives and assiduously avoids counterculture tropes. The ensuing discussion about MAPS’ branding practices considered the challenges of simultaneously appealing to funders, adopting a pose of objective scientific research practices, and maintaining some connection to MAPS’ countercultural roots. Jenny Reardon followed this thread with a series of questions focused on considering how MAPS might challenge the scientific practices employed by the FDA while still moving towards their goal of mainstream medical acceptance. She suggested that while MAPS may be trying to take the drugs out of the counterculture and take the counterculture out of the drugs, there may be useful epistemic insights in countercultural science. She noted that particularly in Northern California there is a long history of important technoscience endeavors initiated by members of the counterculture as a countercultural effort. Martha Kenney focused on concerns surrounding the translations issues of the CAPS, and suggested a moved towards critically considering these issues as part of the measurement practices, rather than as a mere veil to objective understanding. This sparked discussion from the MAPS guests about the various challenges of testing for PTSD in different cultures—if the tests are translated from English on the fly by the tester then there is no consistency in the test.
But even translating in advance poses a challenge because PTSD is articulated through a culture’s psycho-social constructs. Natalie Purcell also posed a valuable question about how MDMA treatment might be producing a certain conception of the phenomenon of PTSD across cultures that deserves critical attention. Karen Barad posed a question about the expression of side-effects to MDMA therapy, and how they might be addressed through good scientific practices.

MAPS representatives took these considerations in the spirit of collaboration and expressed their excitement at exploring them further, both within MAPS itself, and as part of future meetings of the Science and Justice Working Group.