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The long hard road of reconciliation: Prefiguring cultures of peace through the transformation of representations of former combatants and identities of urban youth in Colombia

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Abstract

The Colombian peace accords of 2016 involved a formal commitment to peace between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) and the national government. Despite this advance, societal reconciliation and sustainable peace remain key challenges. Through a longitudinal qualitative design, we investigate the encounter between former guerrilla members and urban university students in a community-based educational space in rural Colombia. Drawing on a social representational approach, we focus on youth's representations of self (students), the remote other (former guerrilla members) and peace and reconciliation as they are produced before, during and after the encounter. Participants were 24 students enrolled in a service-learning course at an urban university in Bogotá. Data collection included written narratives, audio-visual material, focus groups and interviews. Thematic analyses show that as urban youth meet, spend time, and share space and common activities with the former combatants, both representations and identities are transformed. These transformations in self–other understandings unsettle hegemonic narratives supporting an ethos of conflict and introduce alternative representations that prefigure the consolidation of peace-supporting counternarratives. Our results highlight both the resilience of hegemonic narratives and the long-term effects of small-scale educational knowledge encounters for producing agents of peace, recognising the other and prefiguring social change. Reconciliation as process must be thus understood as the uneven development of meaningful self–other interactions that recasts the social fabric as interdependent and builds shared intentionality for achieving sustainable peace.

KEYWORDS
encounters, former combatants, reconciliation, social representations, urban youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Colombian peace accords of 2016 involved a formal commitment to peace between one of the oldest guerrilla groups in Latin America, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP in Spanish), and the national government. This was a significant step in breaking the historical cycles of violence that produced 450,664 deaths, with more than 7 million internally displaced (IDP) and 121,768 'disappeared' people (Comisión para el esclarecimiento de la verdad, 2022). However, as in most post-accord societies, one of the main challenges faced by Colombia is to achieve intergroup reconciliation. Even decades after the signing of peace accords, conflict-affected societies struggle to overcome division, tensions and disputes between different social groups (Hart & Tamayo Gomez, 2022). In Colombia, it is not different. One key challenge is how to reincorporate former guerrilla members, also known as peace signatories,[1] into society and overcome the high levels of stigma and discrimination that continue to operate as obstacles for implementing sustainable peace.

Recent studies on pathways to reconciliation highlight not only the division between victims and perpetrators (Taylor et al., 2016a, 2016b) but also the disconnect between the urban elite and rural conflict-affected populations (Cole et al., 2022). This is a central feature of the Colombian conflict, where there are historical and geographical divisions between urban and rural dwellers (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2021; Rettberg, 2020). This division was also evident in the ratification of the peace agreement by Colombian citizens,[2] and more recently, in the presidential elections of 2022.[3] In both cases, urban citizens mainly voted against the peace agreement and supported rightist candidates (except in Bogota), whereas rural dwellers voted yes and primarily supported the leftist candidate. In addition to remoteness and distance, social inequalities and lack of opportunities interact to exacerbate the problem. Urban citizens are less likely to engage in conversations with conflict-affected populations (either victims or perpetrators) and are therefore vulnerable to stereotyped mass media portrayals of the unknown other (Gordillo, 2021). Stigma also plays a significant role, with a recent national survey finding that almost 40% of respondents consider that being a former guerrilla member is a cause for discrimination (ACDI/VOCA, 2019).

A first step in the implementation of Colombia's peace agreement was to facilitate the reincorporation of former guerrilla members who signed the accords into economic, political and social life by creating Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCR, in Spanish). These actors were initially located in designated territories through a policy that aimed to provide means and resources for the country to achieve the promises and responsibilities that were set out in the formal peace accord, including wide-ranging humanitarian aid through national and international organizations (Barrios et al., 2019; García Duque & Martínez, 2019). Today these territories are known as the Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reconciliation (AECTRs in Spanish) and have become small rural communities where former guerrilla members live with full rights of citizenship and movement. Yet, despite efforts to reincorporate these actors into society and much international support, high levels of stigma remain in the country (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2021). Social inequality continues to be high and is accentuated by the scarce presence of state institutions. Most of the AETCRs are located in remote rural areas with very sparse institutional coverage and a lack of basic services such as health care and clean water, and constant threats to their security.[4] In combination, these factors intensify marginalisation and the distancing of these communities from the main fabric of Colombian society (Hart & Tamayo Gomez, 2022).

Creating scenarios for dialogue and reconciliation among historically and geographically distant social groups can be important in promoting tolerant and respectful social interactions among citizens (Rettberg, 2020). Youth can be a particularly relevant group in developing these efforts. In highly polarised and divided societies it is second or third-generation groups who are most likely to promote or be open to intergroup engagement (Cole et al., 2022). Mobilising educational institutions to support the reconciliation process, reach new generations and create novel ways of understanding the outgroup to build peace is well established (Bar-Tal et al., 2021; Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020; Psaltis et al., 2017). Research with youth has been primarily linked to understanding the impact of interethnic contact in school settings (Loader & Hughes, 2017) or at the university level (Čehajić & Brown, 2010). However, less is known about initiatives that create actual encounters between urban youth and former combatants and the potential of these encounters to promote reconciliation.

In this article, we investigate the encounter between former guerrilla members and urban university students propitiated by a curricular initiative in undergraduate education: the critical service-learning (CSL) course '*Community Psychology Applied to Post-Conflict Settings*' (Fonseca & Reinoso, 2020; Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020). We focussed in particular on the perceptions and identity transformation of urban youth as they experience the encounter with former combatants. Many universities across Colombia have designed theoretical courses that open the space for discussion and dialogue among students about the peace agreement (Corredor et al., 2018; Gomez-Suarez, 2017; Oettler & Rettberg, 2019). However, these courses are mainly theoretical, involve students' reflections amongst themselves and remain based in the cities. Alternatively, in the Community Psychology Applied to Post-Conflict Settings course students travel to a Former Territorial Space for Training and Reconciliation and for 2 weeks live side by side with former guerrilla members, sharing everyday practices and participating in shared spaces for reflection about their encounter

[1] From 2021 onwards, former FARC-EP combatants self-denominate '*firmantes de paz*', which in English means 'peace signatories'. In this article we will use these terms interchangeably.

[2] In the referendum of 2016, 51% voted against its signature with a clear urban-rural division of the vote. While most of the urban citizens, located in the centre of the country, voted no, rural dwellers, mostly affected by the internal armed conflict voted yes. After numerous protests by citizens who supported the peace agreement and meetings with the parties that opposed it, a revised version of the peace agreement was signed in November 2016.

[3] On 19 June 2022, Gustavo Petro was elected President of Colombia. He is the first left-wing president in the country in over 200 years and Vice-president Francia Marquez the first afro-Colombian woman to have this position.

[4] For more information about the current state of the Former Territorial Spaces for training and Reincorporation: https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/es/reincorporacion/Paginas/AETCRs.aspx https://www.cnrfarc.co

(Fonseca & Reinoso, 2020; Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, this is a unique undergraduate curricular experience which combines disciplinary training and everyday encounters with peace signatories.

We explore the psychosocial processes underpinning this encounter through a qualitative longitudinal approach that investigates the transformation of representations and identities as students leave their known environment and come to meet, spend time, and share space and common activities with former combatants, who are for the students the unknown other. Drawing on a social representational approach (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Castro, 2006; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Moscovici, 1988), we focus on the microgenetic process of representational change taking place in the knowledge encounter (Jovchelovitch, 2019; Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015; Priego-Hernández, 2011) between students and former combatants. Microgenetic processes are defined as 'the genetic process in all social interaction in which particular social identities and the social representations on which they are based are elaborated and negotiated' (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990, p. 8). Our aim is to examine processes that can potentially transform the social representations and identities underpinning an ethos of conflict and move these towards an ethos of peace, and in so doing be a starting point for reconciliation and peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014).

We examine reconciliation as a process (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014) and as encounter between self and other (Lederach, 1997). We conceptualise such encounters as pre-figurative praxis, that is, instances of small-scale, alternative interactions that can create and anticipate new representations, identities and social actions (Cornish et al., 2016; Guerlain & Campbell, 2016). Social-psychologically, the idea of pre-figurative practice (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016) is related to the concept of prefigurative politics, a framework that provides a zoom on the micro-relations that can serve as counter-hegemonical social projects to promote social transformations (Trott, 2016; Yates, 2015). Rather than considering reconciliation as a finished outcome at the end of social change, this conceptual field enables us to move from noun to process to suggest that reconciliation is an evolving space of encounters between self and other in which the prefiguration of potentially reconciled futures anticipates the experience *before* social change actually occurs.

1.1 | Revisiting the psychology of reconciliation

Reconciliation is a complex phenomenon with multiple definitions (Cole et al., 2022; Rettberg & Ugarriza, 2016), It has been conceptualised as a process and an outcome (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). As an outcome, reconciliation brings about the restoration of positive relations (Lederach, 1997; Nadler & Shnabel, 2015), the achievement of mutual acceptance (Lederach, 1997; Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003), learning how to live together (Kelman, 2008), the security of a trustful coexistence (Bar-Tal, 2013); and changed perceptions of self (Cohrs et al., 2015) and other (Staub et al., 2005). Both relational and identity-related changes are associated in reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). As a process, reconciliation involves structural and psychological changes (Taylor et al., 2016a, 2016b). Promoting partnerships and cooperation, as well as understanding and experiencing changes in motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes and emotions is part of the process of reconciliation (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004).

Lederach (1997) frames reconciliation as 'a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet' (p. 27). It comprises three main elements: (1) relationship building, (2) encountering with others and acknowledging them and (3) focus on a shared, interdependent future. This definition emphasises the temporal dimension of reconciliation as well as its requirement for changing self and other through an encounter where people re-visit themselves, their enemies, their understandings of each other and their conflict, their fears as well as their hopes. As a result, understanding reconciliation as a process highlights the slow course of unfreezing and changing societal beliefs about self, other and conflict, which generally starts with a small minority (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004), particularly in settings which have experienced intractable conflicts.

Countries around the world have experienced some form of conflict in their history, but only some countries have been involved in *intractable conflict*, a long-lasting and severe process that is sustained by a deep-rooted social-psychological infrastructure that is founded in collective memories, societal beliefs about the conflict (ethos of conflict) and a collective emotional orientation (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013; Bar-Tal et al., 2021; Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014). Under these conditions, conflict-supportive narratives (Bar-Tal et al., 2021) remain even after the signature of peace agreements, challenging societal peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Central to transforming an ethos of conflict into an ethos of peace (Bar-Tal, 2000) is the emergence of peace-supporting 'counter narratives' (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014) that develop from different groups and local organisations. These counter-narratives challenge and negate the conflict-supporting narrative and can be the starting point for reconciliation and peace building in conflict-affected societies (Bar-Tal & Cehajic-Clancy, 2014). Counter-narratives challenge the hegemonic representations and identities that reify divided societies and dominant versions of the past (Psaltis, 2012) and introduce polemic alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008), which are orientated to representations held by others (Gillespie, 2008) and emerge in societal sub-groups (Uluğ & Cohrs, 2019). In a conflict-affected society, aiming for peacebuilding, the emergence of alternative representations can be an important element in the consolidation of counter-narratives and the reconstruction of the societal ethos towards peace. They can be an initial sign of recognition of representations held by antagonistic social groups.

Recent approaches to reconciliation recognise the potential of social representations theory to explore local beliefs, practices and understandings of conflict and peace (Cohrs et al., 2015; Psaltis et al., 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no longitudinal study exploring the microgenesis (Psaltis, 2012) of the processes that generate counter-narratives and challenge the societal ethos in post-conflict settings. This involves a focus on the interactions taking place between divided groups in post-conflict settings. Microgenetic processes contribute important elements to Bar-Tal's conceptualisation of transformation in societal ethos and shed light on the self–other interactions that in time can transform social representations and official hegemonic narratives (Psaltis, 2015) as well as rigid and divided social identities. We explore these processes through the social psychology of representational change (Jovchelovitch, 2007) and in particular the microgenetic processes that may enable or disable the movement of societies from a culture of protracted conflict to cultures of peace and reconciliation.

1.2 | Prefiguring reconciliation: The socio-cultural psychology of knowledge encounters

Social representations are formed in social interactions (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2003; Mouro & Castro, 2012), where the self–other relationship is central towards understanding the meaning of a particular object (Jovchelovitch, 2019; Moscovici, 2008; Psaltis, 2015). Therefore, social transformation involves a *self*, interacting and communicating with an *other* about a particular *object* (Marková, 2003; Marková, 2016). This representational triad highlights the dialogical nature of knowledge construction (Marková, 2003; Psaltis, 2012), which also includes constructing social categories that position self and other (Obradović & Draper, 2022; Reicher, 2004). The intersubjective nature of social representations immerses them in continuous knowledge encounters, that is, the 'point at which two or more representational systems meet, expressing different subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds' (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 129). These intersubjective encounters are immersed in a particular time; involve a commonly recognised object that can be disagreed upon; take place in a specific context and can be dialogical or non-dialogical, depending on the recognition or denial of the perspective of the other (Jovchelovitch, 2007).

Bauer and Gaskell's (2008) wind rose model expands the dialogical model to include the dynamic interaction between social representations constructed in different social milieus through time. The temporal dimension sheds light on how the introduction of new interactions between self and other in time can result in the transformation of hegemonic social representations or the appearance of emancipated ones after the implementation of new norms or a new law (Castro, 2012, 2015). Emancipated representations (Moscovici, 1988) emerging out of subgroups that are in contact puts forward the potential of knowledge encounters between diverse groups to challenge dominant and constraining representations in conflict-affected societies. This model includes the multiplicity of social representations in society as well as the differing 'weight' (i.e., power) they hold within a particular context. When new systems of knowledge enter the public sphere, there are struggles, polemics and opposition due to the transformation of knowledge and the birth of a new social representation (Moscovici, 2000). Despite resistance and semantic barriers (Gillespie, 2020) to new ways of understanding the world, it is the tension produced in the encounter with the other's narrative and representational system that can potentially transform social representations (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernandez, 2015). Uncertainty about one's knowledge and reflection about it (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015) can be the first step to recognising alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008). This is a particular challenge in post-conflict settings, where there are master narratives of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007) that reproduce hegemonic representations and serve as barriers to acknowledging other perspectives.

1.3 | Current study

Our research goal is to examine how microgenetic processes at the level of self–other interactions generate wider societal changes in representations and identities that can challenge an ethos of conflict and create cultures of peace. We investigate urban youth's representations of self (students), the remote other (former guerrilla members) and peace and reconciliation as they are produced before, during and after the encounter between students and former guerrilla members in a small-scale, community-based educational space. We focus on the experiences and representations of young university students who live in the capital city Bogotá and its surrounding areas and who tend to belong to an affluent socio-economic environment. They rarely meet Colombians who were once engaged in the armed conflict and experience the social conditions of rural communities in the country. By examining the development of self–other understandings in an encounter we aim to map out how master narratives of conflict are challenged by alternative representations that can contribute towards consolidating counter-narratives of peace.

Research has shown that service-learning and education initiatives are an important platform for prefigurative praxis (Trott, 2016) and for transforming stereotypes, prejudice, and essentialist beliefs about the unknown other in historically, geographical and culturally divided groups (Bar-Tal et al., 2021). Self–other interactions in small-scale education initiatives of this kind can provide useful insights into the potential of prefiguring reconciliation in post-accord settings. Prefigurative social change, understood as the development of practices and social relations that build a transformed alternative future in the present (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016), can serve as a theoretical platform to explore the *process* of reconciliation and the transformation of social representations and identities that support peacebuilding in a society.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Setting

The present study was conducted in the context of the optative course Community Psychology Applied to Post-Conflict Settings created in 2018 in a private university in Chía, a municipality located near Bogota. The course was developed as a strategy to promote a dialogical encounter between two historically distant social groups: urban youth and former guerrilla members (Fonseca & Reinoso, 2020). It is available biannually to all psychology students in this university, and it is a CSL experience (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020), that is, it involves not only learning in class but also field trips and direct engagement with communities and Colombian social reality. Students have 2 days of training on campus, and an 11-day field visit to a Former Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation, the Centro Poblado Héctor Ramírez (CP-HR), where former FARC-EP members are currently living. The CP-HR is located in the south of Colombia, in La Montañita, a municipality of Caquetá Department (2 h from Florencia, Caquetá's capital city) and more than 16 h by road from Bogotá, the capital city of the country. Caquetá has had a long history of violence and armed conflict and was considered a red area during conflict times. The CP-HR is a small village, home to almost 300 people, including 126 peace signatories, 90 children and their extended families (Educación, 2021).

This course is part of an alliance between the university and the CP-HR. The course was co-designed between two university teachers and one of the community leaders (a former guerrilla member), which facilitated the encounters in the community. Former guerrilla members were informed about the visit, and they voluntarily offered their households to host the students. Participation in daily activities was also approved by the leaders of the CP-HR. In total, 26 former combatants participated actively in the encounters. Seven households hosted the students (rooms were shared among students), who were also included in the everyday socio-economic activities of the community (e.g., pineapple production and harvesting, fishing and cobblery). Research on former combatants' experiences of the encounter has been completed and is currently being analysed in a subsequent article.

2.2 | Participants

Participants in the study were undergraduate students enrolled in the CSL optative course. These students are in the final, 4th and 5th, years of their degree (note that in Colombia the BSc in Psychology is a 5-year degree) and already have a considerable knowledge of psychological science. Twenty-four young people between the ages of 19 and 24 years ($M = 22$) participated in the study. Most participants identified as female (17 females, 7 males). Participation was voluntary, and all of the students participating in the experience agreed to share written texts, diaries and audio-visual material produced before, during and after the course and their visit to the community.

2.3 | Procedure

The study deployed a longitudinal qualitative design combining narratives, audiovisual material, focus group discussions and interviews. Participants were involved in three moments of the process: T1, before the encounter; T2, during the encounter and T3, post encounter. In Time 1, which took place 1 week before the visit to the CP-HR, students had sessions on campus for three days, with discussions about the armed conflict, the peace agreement and their expectations about the visit. In T1, students were assigned the task of writing about their expectations and general feelings about the forthcoming encounter and their motivation for taking the course. Time 2 encompasses the encounter itself, when students lived for 11 days in the CP-HR. During that time, they stayed in former guerrilla members' households and joined local productive projects, working with the community in fishing, harvesting crops, shoemaking and cooking. They also shared meals, looked after children, gave lectures and socialised with members of the community. In the evenings, participants had a space for discussions with the teachers supervising their stay to review highlights of the day as well as to reflect upon their experience (the first author was one of the teachers). Specific moments were given to the students to reflect on the experience through written texts and audio-visual production, such as photography and videos and students were assigned the task of producing a photo essay or a chronicle on a topic of their choice. Throughout the stay students ask questions to former combatants, share their own ideas and in the final day of their stay, they presented either their written chronicles or photo essays to the community of former guerrilla members. This last moment of the encounter serves as a closure of the visit and a way to engage in conversation about the experience. In Time 3, which takes place once the course is finalised, students were invited to participate in focus groups (2 months after the visit) and focused interviews to reflect about their experience (16 months after the visit). Data collection took place between December 2018 and June 2020. The research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Table 1 presents the design and data collection.

TABLE 1 Design and data collection

Pre-departure (T1)	During the encounter (T2)	Post-encounter (T3)
Short written narratives	Written narratives (Chronicles) diaries Photo essays Video presentation of photo essays	Focus groups Focused Interview with visual elicitation (T1-T2-T3 retrospective)

2.4 | Instruments

2.4.1 | Written narratives

Narrative-based instruments were designed to capture students' representations and self-reflection throughout the course: (a) a short, written narrative before the visit, which invited students to narrate their feelings and expectations about the forthcoming visit; (b) field diaries and a chronicle of the encounter during the visit, which instructed students to write about a particular topic of their choice that resonated with their experience of the encounter. These narratives were collated and stored in NVivo for analysis.

2.4.2 | Photo essays

Students used their phones and, in some cases, professional cameras to produce photo essays, which were focussed on a topic of their choice and presented to classmates for discussion. The final versions of the photo essays were presented and discussed with the whole community at the end of students' visit. These final presentations were video recorded and the photo essays stored in NVivo as images.

2.4.3 | Focus groups

Focus groups were designed to elicit reflection and capture students' experiences, feelings and thoughts after the encounter. Probing questions included: (a) what are your general reflections about your experience during your stay; (b) what interactions did you have with former combatants; (c) what did you think of the combatants when you came to meet and know them; (d) how did your family and friends receive you and discuss your experience upon your return. The discussions took approximately 2 h, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis in NVivo.

2.4.4 | Focussed interview

This was designed to capture students' reflections about the process before, during and after the encounter with former combatants. The interview starts by asking participants to draw a timeline of their experience. This is then followed by a series of questions designed to facilitate participant's reflections as they revisit their predeparture narratives and the chronicles/photo essays produced during the encounter (Merton & Kendall, 1946). The topic guide is available in supplemental materials. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.5 | Data analysis

The complete corpus of data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This included texts (written diaries, chronicles, transcribed focus groups and interviews) and audio-visual products (video-diaries, photo essays). Data were transcribed and anonymised using pseudonyms, often selected by the participants. The corpus of data was then uploaded to qualitative software system NVivo 1.6 and organised into folders according to the temporal dimensions—before T1, during T2, and after T3—of each data set. An initial inductive analysis involved reading and annotating through memos in the first five documents of each time (T1, T2, T3) to identify possible codes. We created codes after a second read of the initial memos and annotations. To account for the temporal dimension of representations, the analysis followed a sequential process, starting with data from T1 and ending with T3. Each code was named with initials (T1, T2 or T3) corresponding to the data from which it was drawn. The overall coding frame was developed inductively and deductively taking into account the research aims. Themes were created to account for the main investigative categories of the study: representations of self, representations of other, and representations of peace and reconciliation. These themes contain sub-themes that give nuance to the content and timing of the process of encounter. Once the complete corpus of data was coded, and the coding framework was finished, the coding framework was jointly revised with the second author. Any discrepancies were discussed, text-units were recoded to improve coherence and adjustments were made to the coding framework. The coding frame is available in supplemental materials.

2.6 | Researcher role (Reflexivity)

Doing research in conflict-affected settings requires a rigorous analysis of the role of the researcher, particularly addressing the possible barriers and mistrust that can emerge between researchers and participants (Uluğ et al., 2021). In our case, we are Latin American researchers who have first-hand experience with the divisions and tensions in our countries. The first author is a Colombian citizen, born and raised in an urban area, distant from a conflict that has affected millions of people but with long experience working in rural communities most affected by it. This position enables her to identify the nuances of urban youth discourses around conflict and provides contextual knowledge that allows a fluid conversation with the participants. To avoid oversimplification or undermining certain accounts, the codes were revised and adjusted by the second author, who is not a Colombian citizen. This enabled a combined emic and etic approach (Berry, 1989) to the experience and data analysis.

3 | RESULTS

We found that participation in the encounter offered an opportunity for self–other reflexivity and transformation of beliefs about self, other (former combatants) and objects related to peacebuilding (peace and reconciliation). We also found that these changes were associated with socio-emotional processes that evolved through time. Here we present findings according to the overall four themes yielded by the analysis. Table 2 below presents the themes and sub-themes found.

3.1 | Representing and transforming self: From isolated, uninterested, and distant to agents of peace

Across the three different stages of the experience, we found a strong prevalence of themes related to students' own identities, including how they were represented by others (meta-representations). Before the encounter, key sub-themes were isolation and disconnection of the students from the reality of the country and their privilege and lack of interest. This disconnection was related to their lack of knowledge about conflict and peace, as stated by one of the students: '[the course]

TABLE 2 Themes and sub-themes related to the self–other-object triad

Themes	Before (T1)	During (T2)	After (T3)
From isolated and distant to agents of peace (Self)	Isolated and disconnected Privileged and disinterested	Finding commonalities and differences Self-reflection about privilege Advocates of reincorporation	Critical agents of peace Supporting peace efforts Guerrilla supporters
From cold-hearted to developing a culture of peace (Other)	Representing other: cold-hearted criminals Societal representations: Mistrust and the danger of communism	Warm and welcoming Symbolically constructing peace Rigid worldviews	Legitimate actors committed to peacebuilding Mistrust (societal)
From the victim-perpetrator dyad to a collective construction (Peace and reconciliation)	Peace and reconciliation as conflict between victims and perpetrators Difficult to achieve	Peace as a societal process Reconciliation as recognising the other Forgiveness	Collective Construction Encountering the other Complexity of historical conflict dynamics
Socio-emotional Processes	Anxiety Fear Excitement	Anxiety Surprise Hope Happiness	Hopelessness Fear (societal) Gratitude Surprise (societal)

is *an opportunity to leave the bubble that is Bogota and the University and being able to understand other realities*' (Sergio, Pre-departure narratives). In addition, students showed awareness that former guerrilla members perceived them as privileged: '*I imagined they thought of us as spoiled, weak and unaware of class differences because we were in our own bubble of privilege*' (Antonio, post-encounter interview).

During the encounter, sub-themes evidence a nuanced identification of both similarities and differences between self and other and the realisation that representations held by former guerrilla members about the students were undergoing transformation. During their stay, students reflected on their backgrounds, which entailed common roots and history as well as opposition to those of the CP-HR community: '*The daily life here is exactly the same as with my family. We have coffee every morning, afternoon, and evening, the complicit smiles, and the willingness to keep living and have a good life*' (Amapola, Chronicle). Students were able to link many of their personal experiences with the everyday actions and practices found in the community. Exploring and understanding similarities and differences enhanced self-reflection and the possibility of dialogue between self and other: '*This made me think again about our privilege. Those exercises were very basic things, you don't need a PhD to do it, but that was for me, I was very privileged in my context, the education I had, but then that was also a chance to realise that I also had to re-learn other things*' (Sergio, focused interview). This process of self-reflection is enabled by the multiple conversations and encounters with former combatants, who engage in dialogues with them about class and privilege but also share everyday actions where similarities arise. In this case, self-reflection arises when students internalise the perspectives of the other (former combatants) and observe themselves from their stand point (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015).

Similarly, an important sub-theme of the encounter was the realisation of changes in the representations held by the community about the students. Through their everyday interactions, students experienced the change in these meta-representations, reporting how they felt were now seen beyond their position of privilege. '*Maybe the encounter made them see that even though we are not the same, we have the capacity, the humility and the overall willingness to join them in their activities, so maybe they also deconstructed some of the ideas they had about us (…)*' (Julieta, focused interview). They also realised that although former combatants initially thought of them as inexperienced, this changed to the recognition of the potential of students as advocates of peace and reincorporation of former combatants into society. By considering this alternative meta-representation of self, students are able to experience and behave differently based on this newly identified perception of former combatants, which has a positive impact on their group membership.

After the encounter, the central sub-themes about the self present the students as agents of peace and supporters of the peace process. Through the process students report an identity of peacebuilders and a commitment to engage this identity in their professional career as practising psychologists: '*We are part of a book club with the elderly. We used the book they wrote about their experience during war [Inside the guerrilla] with them. We read them some poems that were in the book and shared our experience in Agua Bonita; they were very interested (…) the leader of the group was especially shocked by our experience. She said we were going to be the generation of change*' (Milena, Focus groups). Therefore, the potential of alternative meta-representations lies in their possibility to create new meanings and become powerful guiding tools for sense-making (Amer & Obradovic, 2022) in a peacebuilding context.

Overall, the sub-themes point to a process of self-learning and transformation. Nevertheless, as they return home after their visit, students also become aware of identity-related tensions. One sub-theme of importance refers to being perceived by some family members and close friends as guerrilla supporters after returning from the community: '*a member of my family said, this is stupid, why do you want to become "guerrillera"?*' (Julia, focused interview). This new representation put forward by interactions with family and friends after the visit to the community points to persistent hegemonic representations of the guerrilla movement and the broader ethos of conflict that continues to be relevant in Colombian society. Referring to urban youth as supporters and/or promoters of the guerrilla movement and affirming that they would be brainwashed and become communists after the encounter exemplifies resistance to alternative representations by using semantic barriers that delegitimise a prefigured culture of peace and signal the experience as dangerous (Gillespie, 2008, 2020).

However, the possibility of change and counternarratives is highlighted by the majority of participants who referred to positive feedback from their close network and a new identity as supporters of peacebuilding efforts by former guerrilla members: '*I think that, when they think about our group, a group of private university students in a bubble of privilege, they also think they have a voice, they have been heard and that we are now contributing towards peace*' (Antonio, focused interview). Creating spaces for contestation of representations of self and other opens the possibility of being re-presented (Howarth, 2006) from disinterested urban youth towards agents of peace. These spaces can be seen as an example of prefigurative praxis (Cornish et al., 2016; Trott, 2016), where students begin to challenge hegemonic narratives about conflict and actively engage in discussions, groups and activities to present alternative representations about former combatants, peace and reconciliation.

3.2 | Representing and recognising the other: From cold-hearted, inhuman and savage perpetrators to citizens developing a culture of peace

A recurring aspect throughout the three moments experienced by the students was the transformation of the representations they held about the unknown other. Before the encounter, students thought of former guerrilla members as cold-hearted criminals and experienced tensions with their families due to the dominantly negative representations of the community: '*[I imagined them] bitter and without any love for society or family, colder than ice and hard as rocks*' (Anastasia, Chronicles). They also reflected upon the lack of humanity, education and the 'macho-like' behaviour of former combatants. These notions are aligned with wider social representations of former combatants (Hart & Tamayo Gomez, 2022). They reflect the persistence of an ethos of conflict, the de-humanisation of the Other and the apprehensiveness of students' families and friends before the visit. A general mistrust of the Other and the closeness of the Others to ideas seen as 'communist' were associated with these themes.

During the encounter, novel categories emerged to refer to former combatants. Sub-themes highlight former guerrilla members as warm and welcoming, constructors of a culture of peace, upholders of a profound sense of community and their role as family members. In their descriptions, peace signatories were depicted as hard-working, dedicated to everyday activities such as harvesting, fishing, caring for children and studying, environmentally aware, respecting and preserving nature and as emotional beings capable of suffering and loving, developers of their small communities through symbolic and tangible efforts. In addition, they reflected on the collective nature of their efforts: '*The CP-HR is the example of a dream come true. It is a space where the community works united against a myriad of challenges but demonstrates a complete determination to fight for their dreams and those of their children*' (Alvaro, photo essay).

TABLE 3 General topics in the final products (chronicles and photo essays)

General topics	Number of documents
The humanity of former guerrilla members	8
Building community ethos Peace building 3	5
Self–other similarities	5
Transformed stereotypes	2

Note: themes obtained from the final products of the service-learning experience (chronicles and photoessays).

These categories were the main topics in the chronicles and photo essays developed throughout the service-learning experience (see Table 3 and Figure 1).

Whereas the majority of themes during the encounter indicated transformed representations and recognition of the Other, one important sub-theme referred to the former combatants as having rigid worldviews. This sub-theme emerged in the context of direct conversations between students and former combatants about the involvement of the latter in the armed conflict. Normalisation of violence produced tensions at several moments during the experience and created a sense of unease among students who felt conflicted about the new reality of peace signatories as committed to peace but at the same time unable to recognise their role in the past: '*There were very clear contradictions and justifications, sometimes their discourse justified killings, they just said: we were at war, or I didn't know if I killed someone because I was far away*' (Siena, focused interview).

Despite these tensions, after the encounter, the central sub-theme is former combatants as legitimate actors willing to reconcile and support peacebuilding efforts:

> '*A lot of them have many projects that are recognised in the society, they have been recognised in different scenarios, we even see them in the news now, and they keep doing things, their projects and they feel good about it, because they are not building peace for themselves, they are building peace for everyone, they just need to keep their strength and belief to keep building the country*' (Amapola, focused interview).

At the same time, the persistence of societal mistrust as a sub-theme is present again, as students return home and microgenetic processes of self and other shift towards interactions with their ordinary network of family members and friends. These interactions reveal the resilience of the ethos of conflict and of negative representations in Colombian society, which associate former combatants with criminality, insecurity and inhumanity. They can be seen in the semantic barriers (Gillespie, 2008) that undermine the lived experience of the encounter and avoid

FIGURE 1 This mural represents the dream of a better country, with more participation, opportunities and equality. Moving from weapons to tools to work the fields (Lisa, photo essay)

the alternative representation presented by participants: '*[after the encounter] my mom told me I had to understand, that once people steal, they will always be thieves, and that I shouldn't trust them*' (Olivia, focused interview). In this case, we observe a delegitimising barrier (Gillespie, 2020), in which stigma remains, and there is still distrust and dismissals of positive remarks about former combatants.

However, there are also sub-themes of curiosity and reflection about the conflict and the need to have open discussions about the encounter with the former combatants:

> '*I was telling my family about my experience, and suddenly, my uncle started telling me: "but you can't forget all of the other things…"., and I just told him I wasn't. I was only acknowledging their presence, and that we shouldn't be thinking about removing them from society, everyone makes mistakes, and that is not the solution… and then everyone was silent for a while. Afterwards, my uncle told me: well… they are people too, I have also made mistakes… and I am not a bad person*' (Julieta, Focus groups).

This excerpt exemplifies a typical conversation reported by students and the potential of these encounters to move from monological to dialogical ones (Jovchelovitch, 2019). The central element here is the effort of both parts to take into account different perspectives and acknowledge them as legitimate.

3.3 | Expanding representations of peace and reconciliation: From the victim-perpetrator dyad to a societal construction

Before departure, dominant sub-themes were the normality of the conflict and the dyad victim-perpetrator. Even though there were no direct questions about the Colombian conflict in any of the instruments, it is of importance that the conflict and its 'normalcy' emerged as central themes in the representations of the students: '*When I was born, the guerrilla had more than 40 years, so when I saw the news about deaths of people, of military men, I said… well, this is what happens, we are in the middle of a conflict*' (Antonio, focused interview). These representations emphasised the difficulties in achieving a peaceful society and the externality of the conflict to the students, which they located in the victim-perpetrator dyad and stories related their past experiences of victimhood: '*Around 2018, I thought that maybe reconciliation was possible if you ask for forgiveness like if a guerrilla man hurt a lot of people, he might have killed, in cold blood killings, and I think these people had to reconcile with their victims*' (Nicole, focused interview).

During the encounter, sub-themes account for the societal and constructed nature of peace and reconciliation and the importance of recognising the Other. Listening to the stories of former combatants, students problematised what they understood as conflict and started to rethink the multiple narratives about Colombia's history: '*I found this other part of the history, which is also my history, and I managed to organise the puzzle in my head, there were a lot of missing pieces, and I could only complete it by being here, spending time with the people*' (Anastasia, focused interview). Sharing daily activities, being part of households and having the possibility to engage in dialogue with former combatants changed the representation of peace and reconciliation from conflict to peace as human action, actively constructed by the community of former guerrilla members. Throughout the different texts and audio-visual products developed during the encounter, there was constant mention of peace and reconciliation as a collective construction (Figure 2) of the CP-HR community. Murals, an adaptation of war equipment (bags) to support harvesting efforts, were some of the examples used. In particular, peace is recognised as embodied in children and the education processes in the community. A central sub-theme emerging in students' reflections about reconciliation was

FIGURE 2 Transformation of life (Liliana, photo essay)

the need for recognition of the Other. Students emphasised the importance of removing barriers to promote encounters that enable knowing and recognising the Other. Forgiveness appeared as an important sub-theme of reconciliation, understood as going beyond apologies between victims and perpetrators. After listening to the stories of former combatants, and also reflecting on their own knowledge of the armed conflict, there was a nuanced view on forgiveness. On one side, students recognised peace signatories' willingness to be open to civil society and ask for forgiveness through their everyday actions. On the other, they argue for bilateral forgiveness, as former combatants had also experienced loss, and torture by the state:

> '*Reconciliation… I think they are also willing to… as [name of former combatant] mentioned, she accepted the apologies by one of the soldiers [about killing a beloved companion], but it is difficult. I don't think it is as simple as asking for forgiveness and that's it. I think it is a process. I think they were also willing to reconcile the damage they had done, by letting us go and visit, to allow other people to visit, organizing events and asking for forgiveness, to heal all the wound*' (Merida, focused interview)

After the encounter, sub-themes point to the recognition of the complexity of the historical dynamics of conflict, developing representations of peace as a societal process and a collective construction which involves removing stigma about each other. This new representation links peace to dialogical encounters and reconciliation, forged in novel forms of recognising the Other and relocating the Self from a defensive position away from the conflict to an understanding that the conflict pertains to the totality of society and that peace must be a shared commitment and societal construction of all, as mentioned by one of the students:

> '*If we want it [peace] to be possible, everyone, and I mean, absolutely everyone has to be involved. Being an observer is not enough. You must be able to act either way. In our case, we need to keep going with projects, promote encounters, and so on, and we all have to create processes of forgiveness and reconciliation*' (Antonio, focused interview).

3.4 | Socio-emotional processes

Throughout the experience, students reported multiple emotions. Before the encounter, fear, anxiety and excitement were prevalent. Students feared the encounter with former FARC-EP members and were anxious about the interactions they might have: '*I was very afraid, but I didn't tell anyone at home. I think it is different to go to jail and visit people, we were actually going to spend time with them, not like in a hotel, going for a second then going back, we were staying with them, even sharing the bathroom*' (Olivia, focused interview).

However, albeit less frequently, there was also a sense of excitement about the novelty of the experience and the possibilities involved in the encounter: '*I didn't know a lot of things, of how it was going to be, but for me it was like an adventure, or a new experience, so I was excited about these new opportunities to get to know them*' (Merida, focused interview).

During the encounter, new emotions emerged, such as surprise, hope and happiness. Anxiety was dominant when students prepared to share the households with former combatants, but once they were living with them, there was an overall sense of positive surprise and hope. These were linked to feelings of empathy and facilitated by conviviality and conversations about their lives, dreams and hopes: '*we are very surprised, I think I speak for everyone, we are surprised, this is very hopeful, it is confusing, it is mysterious, it is a lot of things*' (Liliana, video diary).

After the visit, both negative and positive emotions coexisted, mainly related to the reactions of family members and close friends. There was mainly curiosity and surprise but also fear on the part of some members of their family and friends. As a result, hopelessness emerged as an emotion that some students experienced when referring to reconciliation:

> '*Reconciliation is not that easy, and I think I've lost a bit of hope, because of how my friends and family reacted, to see that they still think of them [former combatants] as the complete enemy*' (Julia, interview).

However, there were feelings of gratitude and surprise about encountering and recognising the other as well as being recognised by them beyond rigid stereotypes: '*I think some of them [family and friends] were in shock, they kept asking for more information, as if they didn't* *believe me, I think they were disoriented, and I think that it is important to feel like that, when you have new information, you can feel surprised by all the particularities of the people*' (Lucía, focused interview). This dual transformation of identities as an outcome of recognition (Amer & Obradovic, 2022) was experienced through positive emotions such as gratitude: '*He [former guerrilla member] thanked me for everything we did, but I also thanked him, I had the opportunity to see him in a different light, and that is very special*' (Olivia, focused interview).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the transformation of representations of self (students), other (former combatants) and peace and reconciliation held by urban youth through time (before, during and after the experience), seeking to understand the microgenetic processes (self–other interactions) underpinning reconciliation and changes from ethos of conflict to cultures of peace. We investigated the prefigurative potential of knowledge encounters to renew interactions between historically divided social actors and generate in the present experiences of what a future ethos of peace between self and other could be.

Our results indicate that as urban youth meet, spend time and share space and common activities with the former combatants, both representations and identities are transformed. Through self–other interactions before, during and after the actual encounter, urban youth experience a rich psychological process of self-reflection and exposure to the meta-representations of former guerrilla members that moves their self-understanding from being isolated and uninterested in the reality of the country to agents and supporters of peace. At the same time, the encounter enables a renewal in the representations of the former combatants, whose identities are transformed from criminal and cold-hearted to warm, welcoming and constructors of peace. Throughout the experience, urban youth also change their conceptions of peace and reconciliation, which move from being focused on the conflict and the opposition victim-perpetrator to a more nuanced understanding of societal construction in which combined self-reflection and recognition of the Other (Jovchelovitch, 2007) can build reconciliation as a process that must involve the whole of society. These transformations in the socio-cognitive content of representations and identities are associated with socio-emotional processes that include fear, anxiety, surprise, hope, gratitude and despair. It was clear that during the encounter the ethos of conflict was questioned and an emerging ethos of peace was prefigured. However, this prefiguration was contested when students returned home to their family and friends and were confronted with the hegemonic representations of Colombian society about former guerrilla members, the conflict and the (im)possibility of peace (Figure 3).

The dynamic between hegemonic narratives of the conflict and its actors and the alternative representations carried by the students demonstrated on the one hand the psychosocial resilience of ethos of conflict and on the other hand the potential of new self–other interactions for introducing alternatives that can potentially move societies towards an ethos of peace. These findings corroborate Bar-Tal's (2007) conceptualisation of the sociopsychological infrastructure of protracted conflict and what is required for transforming an ethos of conflict into a culture of peace, namely changing a collective memory that normalises conflict, frozen social identities, a focus on delegitimising the adversary group and a collective fear that prevents any potential conversation about peace and reconciliation. These insights are well-established in the literature. However, what our study highlights are the microgenetic interactions that through novel and unlikely self–other relationships initiate change in this infrastructure and bring to the fore the 'long and hard road' of reconciliation as a process.

Our results indicate that *in and through* the concrete experience of the encounter a transformation of representations of self and other takes place through time and these changes are carried forward towards society even after the encounter has ended. In this sense, microgenetic transformations are important components of societal-level transformations and corroborate insights from socio-cultural developmental psychology that social change involves and requires microgenetic change (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Gillespie, 2012; Psaltis, 2015). In the present study, self-reflection was triggered by dialogical interaction with the meta-representations of the hitherto unknown other, the former combatants. The students' self-understanding became an object of thought for itself (Gillespie, 2006), and by taking the perspective of former combatants, students were able to manifest self-doubt about themselves and their role in society (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). In synchrony with self-reflection, alternative representations of the Other were forged. Sharing households and daily activities with the other provided a unique opportunity to engage in perspective-taking and learning, which led to the deconstruction of previous negative representations and produced novel categories to describe former combatants. The lived interactions enabled by the encounter and the internal uncertainty about one's own knowledge as it encounters the knowledge of others are a mechanism that allows the construction of new knowledge (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015; Jovchelovitch, 2019).

In the case of post-accord societies, new knowledge can bring the internalised Other to consciousness (Gillespie, 2020), change perceptions about outgroups and even about one's own identity (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016), which has been reported as a precondition for social change (Brasil & Cabecinhas, 2019). During and after the encounter, students re-signified representations of both self and other as committed to peacebuilding efforts and sharing a critical perspective about conflict. These changes unfreeze rigid social identities and facilitate listening so that dominant narratives carried by social actors become reflexive and open to new meanings. This is an important first step towards understanding the microgenesis of reconciliation through an encounter (Psaltis, 2012) and even more so in post-accord settings, as the question of the roots of conflict and the possibility of peace emerges into the public sphere.

Our findings indicate that the possibility of self-doubt and self-reflection can be the basis for a renewed critical awareness (Freire, 1973) of the structural elements of conflict, as well as the possibility of action and agency in the peacebuilding process. They reveal something important about the dynamic of cultural change and the

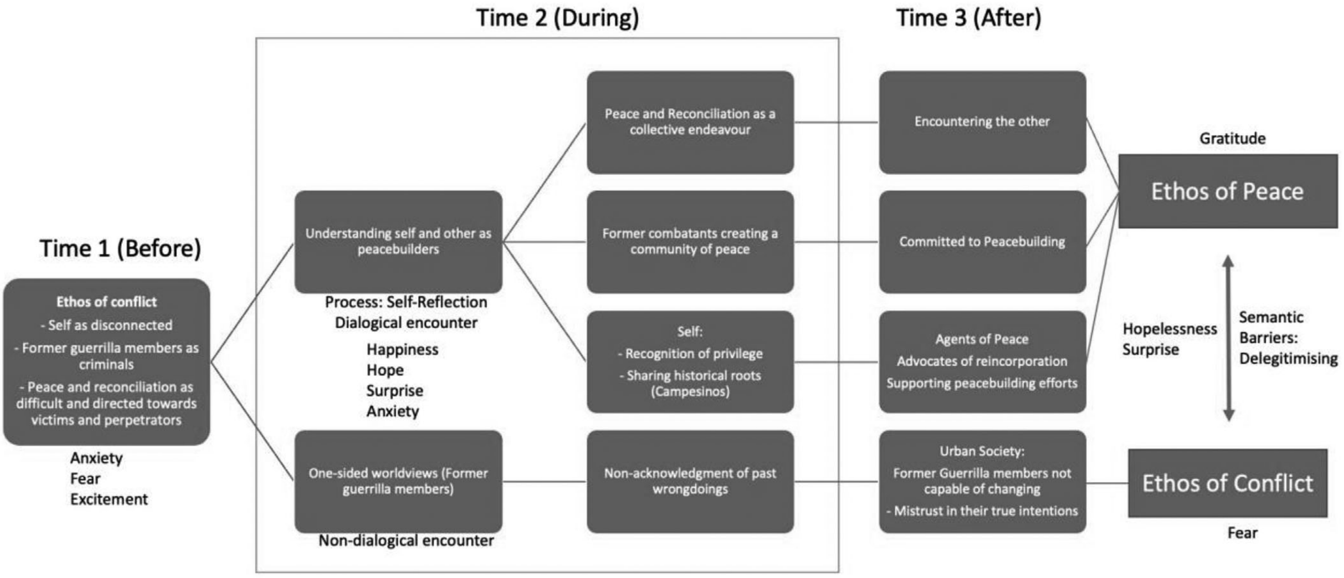

FIGURE 3 Transformation of self–other-object over time

uneven process whereby hegemonic narratives start to shift in the public sphere. First, the change in networks of social influence produced by novel self–other interactions changes understandings of the conflict and its actors. Before the encounter, students' representations of former guerrilla members were directly linked to their primary societal context: middle-upper class, urban setting. However, during the encounter, former combatants became part of their context and everyday interaction and this change had a direct effect on students' representations.

Second, there are tensions and ambivalence in these novel interactions. Even though they challenge hegemonic patterns and create counternarratives to dominant representations of conflict they also trigger the use of semantic barriers (Gillespie, 2020) to delegitimise the encounter and the new representations being formed. For example, during the encounter, students felt uneasy with the need of former guerrilla members to rigidly defend their understandings of the conflict and justify violence without fully acknowledging their part. This is an ongoing challenge for reconciliation, as acknowledging past wrongdoings is a central element of the reconciliation process (Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003) and failing to do so can be a barrier to transformation in knowledge, identity and emotions.

In the period after the visit, as students returned to their primary context, despair co-existed with hope as they were confronted again with the well-established hegemonic representations of family and friends. Yet, in post-conflict settings, it is important to recognise reconciliation as a slow developmental process that starts with the actions of minorities (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004) and needs continuous elaboration, negotiation and supportive spaces. The very presence of semantic barriers has been also considered as an indication of the transformative potential of prefigurative encounters that nurture alternative representations (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). In our study, open discussions among students, former combatants, family and close friends created opportunities for new beliefs about the peace process and former guerrilla members. Post-encounter interviews conducted 16 months after the encounter evidenced the continuity of this process and the resilience of the negotiations, interactions and questioning that was opened up by the experience.

Our findings reveal that perspective-taking and self-reflection are psychologically and socially challenging, but nevertheless foundational elements to support reconciliation processes. They require follow-up, engaged and continuous discussions and enabling spaces (Guerlain & Campbell, 2016). Numerous studies have outlined the potential of intergroup friendships to promote perspective-taking and empathy (Cehajic et al., 2008; Noor et al., 2008; Tam et al., 2008); however, our study highlights the potential of safe spaces to produce meaningful encounters with others who are not considered a friend. Personal experiences spending time in safe spaces with antagonist groups can change attitudes towards the outgroup while also highlighting the importance of prolonged interactions and the need to move beyond traditional victim-perpetrator dyads (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Ugarriza & Nussio, 2017).

Novel representations of peace and reconciliation as a collective endeavour of all resonate with Lederach's definition of reconciliation as the sharing of an interdependent future and add to it by making peace and reconciliation its shared motivation. In living with former combatants and their families, students could encounter alternative knowledge of peace and reconciliation as well as appreciate the interdependence of different social groups in the making of Colombian society and its conflicted past. In particular, students reflected on their own role in this collective construction and potential as agents of peace, which signals the prefiguration of an ethos of peace (Bar-Tal, 2000). Reflections about the importance of the encounter, challenging stigma and recognising the humanity of the other emphasise the potential of microgenetic transformations for wider societal change and align with reports by similar groups in other post-conflict contexts (Karić & Mihić, 2020; Nicholson, 2019).

Changes in representations of self and other for urban youth and former guerrilla members are seen as directly linked to peacebuilding efforts both in the present and in the future. This finding is a key element to understanding reconciliation not only as related to a superordinate category of identification such as 'being humans' (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016), but as a process founded on the building of a shared intentionality in post-conflict societies: achieving sustainable peace.

4.1 | Limitations and future directions

Our analysis revealed that the encounter between students and former combatants in the safe space of a service-learning initiative can produce remarkable transformations in representations of self, other and peace and reconciliation. However, it is important to approach these results with caution. First, the research relies on one single cohort of students and it would therefore be necessary to expand the investigation into future cohorts as well before we can be confident about making general claims about the microgenesis of reconciliation in these encounters. Second, participation in the service-learning experience is voluntary and as this is an optative course, students self-select for travelling to the field and spending time with former combatants in the community. This poses questions about their individual cognitive and emotional predisposition to peace. However, it is worth noting that this particular university is considered one of the most conservative in the country, and, as seen in the results of this study, even if students were predisposed towards peace, the findings demonstrate their fear and dilemmas before and after the encounter.

Another limitation is that our study focused on representations held by students only. Further research should also examine 'the other side' of the encounter, namely the former combatants who participated in the experience. This also applies to the study of representations held by privileged urban society. These complementary perspectives would enable a better understanding of the dynamics underpinning the maintenance of hegemonic representations related to the ethos of conflict as well as how alternative representations challenge them over time.

Despite these limitations, our study sheds light on the microgenesis of societal change and points to the importance of aligning desired changes at the societal level with the development of supportive and safe spaces where micro-interactions between conflicting and divided social actors can take place. Previous research on prefiguration has focused on analysing social movements and its role challenging capitalism or neoliberal politics (de Coster & Zanoni, 2022; Yates, 2015). However, this study goes beyond social movements and focuses on transforming self–other representations in the small-scale, everyday community space of an educational initiative. It also innovates by researching a hard-to-reach, unresearched community of former combatants in rural Colombia. It highlights the potential of education and the contribution of the psychology curriculum to prefiguration in post-conflict scenarios, encouraging the interactions and dialogues that need to be established in a country still struggling to overcome conflict. This can inform as well as support national policies and the future-oriented construction of political alternatives related to peacebuilding and reconciliation.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of the microgenesis of reconciliation efforts in an educational initiative, this article demonstrated the role of knowledge encounters (Aveling & Jovchelovitch, 2014; Jovchelovitch, 2007) to understanding the tensions and struggles that mediate moving from an ethos of conflict to one of peace (Bar-Tal, 2000). Identity and representational struggles linked to the emergence of alternative representations (ethos of peace) as they clash with hegemonic ones (ethos of conflict) shed light on the potential of prefiguration to support counter-hegemonic projects (Trott, 2016). They demonstrate that transforming the cultural ethos of conflict requires alignment for changes at the societal, interpersonal and individual levels. Here we have shown that wider societal narratives and counter-narratives linked to ethos of peace and conflict change in parallel with changes experienced in supportive and safe spaces for novel self–other dialogues between historically divided social groups.

Small-scale education initiatives have a long-term effect on the transformation of representations of self and other and open a new avenue for current discussions about prefigurative social change. They highlight the potential of educational safe spaces for promoting transformative encounters that prefigure dialogical social interactions among cultural, social and politically opposed social groups and challenge hegemonic representations related to the ethos of conflict. This can be the first step towards a critical view on education and its role in both transforming conflict-supporting narratives and supporting peacebuilding efforts (Bar-Tal et al., 2021; Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author reports no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Complete coding framework with excerpts is available as supplementary material. The complete data set is not publicly available, given the sensitive information regarding former combatants and conflict in Colombia. Research data are not shared. cd_value_code=text

ETHICS APPROVAL

This research project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science (Reference # 1061).

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