Modeling the thermodynamics of conformational isomerism in solution via unsupervised clustering: the case of Sildenafil

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Abstract

We present a systematic approach for the identification of statistically relevant conformational macrostates of organic molecules from molecular dynamics trajectories. The approach applies to molecules characterised by an arbitrary number of torsional degrees of freedom and enables the transferability of the macrostates definition across different environments. We formulate a dissimilarity measure between molecular configurations that incorporates information on the characteristic energetic cost associated with transitions along all relevant torsional degrees of freedom. Such metric is employed to perform unsupervised clustering of molecular configurations based on the *fast search and find of density peaks* algorithm. We apply this method to investigate the equilibrium conformational ensemble of Sildenafil, a conformationally complex pharmaceutical compound, in different environments including the crystal bulk, the gas phase and three different solvents (acetonitrile, 1-butanol, and toluene). We demonstrate that, while Sildenafil can adopt more than one hundred metastable conformational configurations, only 12 are significantly populated across all the environments investigated. Despite the complexity of the conformational space, we find that the most abundant conformers in solution are the closest to the conformers found in the most common Sildenafil crystal phase.

Introduction

Conformational isomerism in organic molecules is an important characteristic which bears significance in a variety of problems. For example, binding properties of proteins in protein-ligand complexes are controlled by their conformational configuration by affecting association/dissociation rates, and by entropic contributions to the process.[1,2] Understanding the details and mechanisms of conformational changes that proteins undergo is an important part of modern drug discovery methodologies.[3] For small organic molecules the ability to adopt different conformational configurations can open the possibility for the formation of multiple crystal forms known as conformational polymorphs[4,5] - crystal structures of components with the same chemical formula but different molecular shape. This phenomenon is particularly important in the pharmaceutical industry where the uncontrolled occurrence of an undesired polymorphic form can affect the stability, shelf-life or efficacy of the drug. In the field of crystallisation, conformational rearrangements are not only relevant to polymorphism. In our previous work[6] on the study of ibuprofen conformational isomerism at the crystal/solution interface, we demonstrate how, even for relatively small systems, conformational rearrangements, crystal growth and dissolution are inherently coupled. Additionally state-to-state transitions of a molecule along its path of incorporation into the crystal from solution may be limited by conformational rearrangements.

Computational studies of conformational rearrangement in small organic molecules often use internal torsional angles to describe the adopted molecular configuration.[6–9] Torsional angles are a convenient way of describing rearrangements as they provide a fine-grained comprehensive picture of the internal molecular configuration space. To describe the conformation of larger molecules such as peptides or aliphatic chains, however, resorting to descriptors such as end-to-end distance or Root Mean Square Deviation (RMSD)[1,10] is a common choice, made necessary by the fact that the torsional angle space for these systems is high-dimensional and impractical to read and interpret. A critical drawback of this approach is that, by reducing the dimensionality of the descriptors space used to represent the configuration space, degeneracy is introduced, and consequently information lost. More generally, reliable conformational descriptors are particularly important when implementing enhanced sampling techniques. Enhanced sampling techniques are heavily reliant on the use of appropriate system descriptors. Particularly for studying self-assembly processes, conformationally flexible systems currently present a major challenge,[11] thereby driving the search for a systematic approach to their classification.

Partitioning of configurational space for large organic molecules is typically done through k-means clustering based methodologies.[12–14] This procedure is heavily reliant on the system descriptor of choice as well as the number of clusters selected by the user. Tools which allow the systematic classification of molecular configurations regardless of the dimensionality of the space of descriptors necessary to completely capture every conformational change, have therefore the potential to improve existing methodologies for studying the effects of conformational rearrangements during crystal nucleation and growth.[6]

Here, we propose a methodology which enables the study of conformational isomerism in a general way for systems with a large number of torsional degrees of freedom. Our approach, based on the application of the Fast Search and Find of Density Peaks clustering algorithm,[15] allows to define a set of conformational states that is common to multiple environments (i.e. solvents), and enables a systematic assessment of their impact on the conformational landscape. We demonstrate this approach by studying the conformational rearrangement of sildenafil, a commercially available active pharmaceutical ingredient (API).[7]

Sildenafil is the main component of Viagra,[7] which is known to have two polymorphic forms.[16,17] Sildenafil is a relatively large molecule consisting of 63 atoms and a number of ring structures. The two forms of sildenafil (denoted form 1 and form 2) are morphotrop-

ically related to one another as a noncrystallographic rearrangement can transform one to the other,[17] with form I being the thermodynamically stable form. Both forms have two molecules in the asymmetric unit adopting different conformations.[16,17]

With the use of a data clustering approach we demonstrate how characteristic conformational configurations can be identified *a priori* for a molecule in the gas phase in order to then extract quantitative information on conformational states from enhanced sampling molecular dynamics simulations performed in solution under experimentally relevant conditions. Our methodology also enables the breakdown of the free energy of a conformational state into enthalpic and entropic contributions, providing a valuable insight into the effect of the solvent on conformational isomerism. With this work we aim to propose a method for conformational analysis which provides a route towards achieving rapid and automated conformational classification, enabling the comprehensive study of conformational isomerism in solution for systems for which it is currently impractical.

Methods

In this work, molecular dynamics (MD) simulations are used to study the conformational isomerism of sildenafil in the crystal bulk, in the gas phase and in three solvents - acetonitrile, 1-butanol and toluene. MD is combined with well-tempered metadynamics (WTmetaD) to enable the study of the conformational rearrangements of sildenafil in solution. The Fast Search and Find of Density Peaks (FSFDP) clustering method, developed by Rodriguez and Laio,[15] is used to identify sildenafil conformers in the gas phase and generate a characteristic fingerprint in torsional angle space for each of them. The metric used to define the similarity between configurations includes information on the free energy cost associated to transitions in every degree of freedom explicitly considered. The fingerprints are used to post-process the biased trajectories in solution and assign a conformational macrostate for each trajectory step. Through the implementation of a reweighting procedure, the equilibrium probability of conformers, as well as enthalpic and entropic contributions to the free energy of each conformer for each of the solvents considered is obtained.

In this study, the molecular rearrangement of the drug is described in torsional angle space by considering all internal dihedral angles as shown in Figure 1. By including all torsional degrees of freedom of the molecule, this study adopts a systematic and transferable strategy for tackling conformational rearrangement.

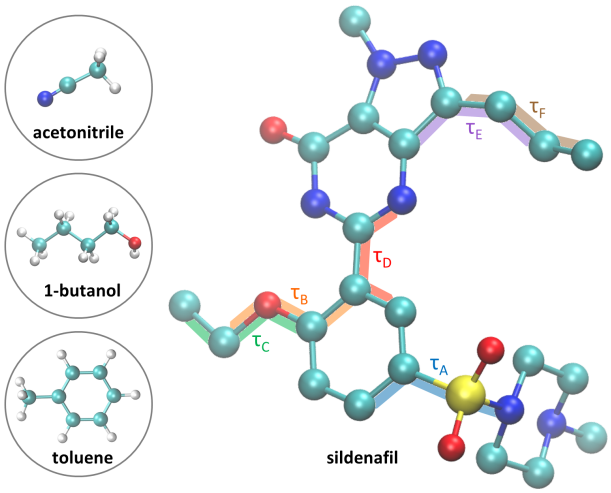


Figure 1: Sildenafil structure, where hydrogen atoms have been excluded for simplicity. The six internal torsional angles, labelled τ_A, τ_B, τ_C, τ_D, τ_E and τ_F, are marked on the structure. All images of molecular structures shown have been generated with VMD.[18]

Molecular Dynamics Setup

Molecular dynamics simulations of form I and form II crystal polymorphs of sildenafil, a sildenafil molecule in the gas phase and a sildenafil molecule in three different solvents were performed using the Generalised Amber Force Field (GAFF).[19] In support of the choice of a force field, a table of solvent densities as well as crystal cell parameters of form I and form II, are provided in Section A of the Supporting Information. For all systems considered in this work GAFF is able to reproduce properties consistent with experimental data. MD simu-

lations were performed with Gromacs 5.1.4[20] with an explicit representation of the solvent. Force field parameters for solvent molecules were obtained from the Virtual Chemistry solvent database.[21,22] A standard cut-off distance of 1.0 nm for the non-bonded interactions was chosen, along with including long-range intermolecular interactions using the particle-mesh Ewald (PME) approach.[23] A time step of 2 fs was used. The system-specific setup is described in the following paragraphs.

Simulations of the Crystal Bulk Supercells of size 3.5 × 3.5 × 5.0 nm and 7.0 × 3.5 × 2.3 nm, representing crystal forms I and II respectively, were set up containing 96 molecules each. Crystal structure *.cif* files[16] at ambient temperature and pressure were obtained from the CSD under deposition codes QEGTUT and QEGTUT02. In both cases unbiased MD simulations were performed for 10 ns in the isothermal-isobaric ensemble, implemented by applying an anisotropic pressure control using the Berendsen barostat[24] and the Bussi-Donadio-Parrinello thermostat.[25]

Simulation of Sildenafil in the Gas Phase A 450 ns unbiased simulation of a sildenafil molecule in a box of 2.0 × 2.0 × 2.0 nm in vacuum was carried out in the canonical ensemble by applying the Bussi-Donadio-Parrinello thermostat.[25] A free energy profile of each torsional angle as denoted in Figure 1 was obtained. All one-dimensional free energy profiles are reported in Section B of the Supporting Information.

Simulations of Sildenafil in Solution Simulations in solution were set up by solvating a single sildenafil molecule with each of the three solvents used in this study - acetonitrile, 1-butanol and toluene - by using the `insert-molecules` utility in Gromacs in a box of approximate size of 4 × 4 × 4 nm. MD simulations were performed in combination with well-tempered metadynamics. All simulations were performed in the isothermal-isobaric ensemble (NPT) at pressure of 1 bar and temperature of 300 K. The Parrinello-Rahman barostat[26] was used for 1-butanol and toluene, while the Berendsen barostat[24] was employed in the case of acetonitrile, where Parrinello-Rahman displayed an unstable behavior. Solvent densities are reported in Section A of the Supporting Information. Also in this case temperature control was implemented through the Bussi-Donadio-Parrinello thermostat.[25]

Well-Tempered Metadynamics Setup

Metadynamics was implemented in order to enhance fluctuations in the internal rearrangement of sildenafil in solution for computational efficiency. The bias was applied as a function of the τ_A torsional angle as shown in Figure 1 in blue. The choice of the CV was made based on 10 ns exploratory MD simulations, which revealed that overcoming the barrier associated with the rotation of τ_A in an efficient way requires enhanced sampling in all three solvents. The biasing protocol was applied in the form of Gaussian functions with a width of 0.3 rad and height of 2.5 k_BT at a rate of every 500 simulation steps with a bias factor of 15 K. The use of WTmetaD was implemented through plumed 2.4[27] and all input files are deposited at the plumed-NEST.[28]

Distance Matrix Calculation

Studying the conformational isomerism of systems with several internal degrees of freedom in a systematic and transferable way requires the need of grouping molecular configurations and identifying relevant conformational states. Achieving this provides the opportunity of reducing the dimensionality of the problem and enables the analysis of biased molecular dynamics trajectories in order to obtain useful kinetic and thermodynamic information. To achieve this partitioning of configurational space in an unsupervised data-driven manner, a recently developed data clustering method is applied. In this work, the Fast Search and Find of Density Peaks (FSFDP) algorithm, developed by

Rodriguez and Laio,[15] is implemented. The algorithm can be used to group molecular configurations into clusters of structures based on their similarity by calculating a distance matrix between configurations. The distance matrix refers to a matrix containing the distance between any two molecular configurations i and j as a function of the chosen system descriptors e.g. internal torsional angles, with no limit on the dimensionality. Here, we consider each frame of an MD trajectory of a sildenafil molecule in the gas phase as a single point in the 6-dimensional torsional angle space and so the distance d_{ij} between every two frames i and j, is calculated according to Eq.1:

$$d_{ij} = \sqrt{\sum_{n=1}^{N_{CV}} (d_n w_n)^2} \qquad (1)$$

where N_{CV} refers to the total number of system descriptors, which in this case is 6 torsional angles, while w stands for a *weight* applied to each dimension as described below.

Clustering structures in a meaningful way requires a distance matrix calculation which is able to distinguish between conformational *transitions* and conformational *adjustments*. These terms refer to the nature of the conformational rearrangement within the molecule. A conformational *transition* describes the conversion of one stable conformational state into another, usually associated with overcoming a free energy barrier higher than k_BT. An *adjustment* is, on the other hand, a term used to describe a minor rearrangement which is not associated with a new conformer, but rather a relaxation of the structure from one configuration to another, both of which occupy the same free energy minimum in collective variable space.[5] In order to resolve these two cases when calculating the distance matrix, a slight modification to the algorithm is applied by including a weight associated with the free energy barrier of rotation, w, of each torsional angle in order to scale the distance d. In such a way, rotations which lead to new conformational configurations through rare, activated transition, will have a higher impact on the distance compared to those associated with an adjustment or a fast conversion.

Table 1: Free energy barrier of rotation to each torsional angle obtained from simulations in vacuum, along with the corresponding rescaling used as a weight in calculating the distance matrix.

Angle	**Barrier Height** $[k_BT]$	**Weight**
τ_A	6	5
τ_B	1.5	1.3
τ_C	2	1.7
τ_D	1.2	1
τ_E	2.5	2.1
τ_F	4	3.3

The weight factor, w, is obtained by recording the lowest rotational barrier for each torsional angle according to the calculated one-dimensional free energy profiles (see Section B of the SI) along each dimension of the CV space. The barriers are then normalised with respect to the lowest one as shown in Table 1. An example for the case of τ_A is shown in Figure 2.

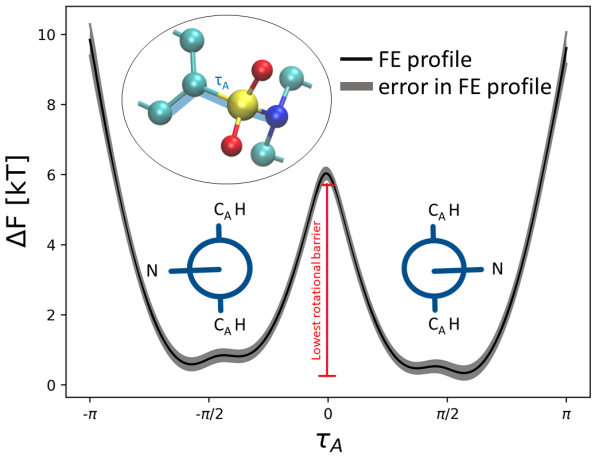


Figure 2: Free energy profile of torsional angle τ_A obtained from a vacuum simulation, along with Newman projections of the angle in the free energy minima. The lowest free energy barrier of rotation was extracted for the clustering weights.

Once the distance matrix has been calculated, the algorithm operates by calculating the density of each point, evaluated by considering the number of neighbours within a distance cut-off d_c according to:

$$\rho_i = \sum_j \chi(d_{ij} - d_c) \quad (2)$$

where $\chi(x) = 1$ if $x < 0$ and $\chi(x) = 0$ otherwise.

$$\delta_i = \min_{j:p_j > p_i} d_{ij} \quad (3)$$

Cluster centres are characterised by having the highest density within a cluster of points and a large distance from points with a higher density as shown in Eq. 3. Each cluster has an associated core set of data points and a halo, evaluated based on the given cut-off. The core set are the points which belong exclusively to a cluster and can be found within the selected distance cut-off from the cluster centre, while the halo is considered as the noise around the cluster core, while still affiliated with the given cluster. This grouping algorithm is particularly powerful as the clustering procedure is such that the number of clusters arises intuitively, which makes it particularly suited to identifying characteristic conformational configurations, described by a highly multidimensional set of CVs.

Dimensionality Reduction of Molecular Trajectories

Clustering of the molecular configurations was performed using the FSFDP algorithm, with a distance cut-off d_c of 2%. Based on the distance matrix calculation and the chosen cut-off, the sildenafil configurations sampled in the gas phase are grouped into clusters, each consisting of a cluster centre structure, a core set of configurations and a halo. All configurations assigned to a cluster were used to generate a structural *fingerprint* for the identified conformer. The term fingerprint refers to the probability distribution of each torsional angle as illustrated in Figure 1. All fingerprints are provided in Section D of the Supporting Information.

Dimensionality reduction of the trajectories of sildenafil in solution was carried out in order to represent conformational change of the molecule in a one-dimensional space and hence enable further analysis of the enthalpic and entropic contributions to conformational isomerism in solution. To achieve that, an algorithm which compares the instantaneous value of the torsional angles, defined to describe the molecular configuration, to each of the given fingerprints for every trajectory frame was set up. For every instantaneous torsional angle value where the corresponding probability density in the fingerprint is nonzero a value of 1 is assigned. The total number of variables used for the classification is 6 and therefore a score of 6 means that the molecular configuration in the given frame matches a fingerprint and therefore is assigned the corresponding conformer number. A score lower than 6 indicates at least one mismatch between the given configuration and the fingerprint and is therefore assigned a value of 0 signifying that it remains unclassified.

Conformational Equilibrium Probability Distribution

A characteristic fingerprint in torsional angle space for each dominating sildenafil conformer in the gas phase was generated. Choosing the gas phase as a reference is inspired by the work of Cruz-Cabeza and Bernstein,[5] who use the same conditions to define reference conformational states. To calculate the conformational population of sildenafil in solution, each frame of the biased trajectory was assigned a characteristic conformer following the procedure discussed in the previous section. A discrete probability distribution in one-dimensional space can then be straightforwardly calculated, with the caveat that the bias potential deposited throughout the duration of the simulation needs to be accounted for in a procedure referred to as *reweighting*.

In this work, the total metadynamics bias potential applied as a function of τ_A and recovered at the end of the simulation of a sildenafil molecule in solution, $V^{total}(\tau_A)$, is used in the reweighing scheme.[29] The trajectory is post-processed so that each time frame, with a corresponding value for each torsional angle, as well a conformational cluster number, will also have a value associated with the total bias de-

posited in that particular point in the CV space of τ_A. For simplicity, let us refer to this value as $V_i^{total}(\tau_A)$ where i stands for the trajectory frame number. The weight W_i applied to each frame when reconstructing the *unbiased* probability distribution of conformational isomers in solution is a Boltzmann weight associated with a rescaled value of $V_i^{total}(\tau_A)$ according to:

$$W_i = e^{\beta(V_i^{total} - max(V_i^{total}))} \quad (4)$$

In such a way, the weight associated with points in CV space where the maximum total external bias was deposited will have a value of 1, as it corresponds to the lowest point in the free energy profile in τ_A and all other frames will have a correspondingly lower weight. This reweighting scheme was implemented to reconstruct the population of sildenafil conformers in different solvents, as well as obtain a two-dimensional histogram of conformer number and its associated potential energy as discussed in the following section.

Enthalpy and Entropy Contribution to the Free Energy

The free energy of each conformational state of sildenafil in solution was broken down into enthalpic and entropic contribution by following the procedure outlined by Gimondi et. al.[30,31] In short, the free energy in the isothermal-isobaric ensemble, ΔG, can be expressed in terms of enthalpy ΔH and entropy ΔS in the parameter space s as $\Delta G(s) = \Delta H(s) - T\Delta S(s)$ Because conformational transitions in solution have a negligible contribution to the change in the volume of the system, $\Delta V(s)$, the enthalpy is reduced to the internal energy of the system. Furthermore, simulations are performed in the isothermal-isobaric ensemble, which is associated with a constant temperature T, meaning that the kinetic energy is independent of the system descriptor s. Therefore, in practice, the enthalpic contribution to the free energy reduces down to the potential energy (PE) of the system.[31]

To calculate the potential energy corresponding to each conformer, the PE associated with the internal rearrangement of sildenafil i.e bonds, angles and dihedrals, as well as the short-range Van der Waals and Coulomb forces between solute-solute and solute-solvent are obtained from the `gmx energy` utility implemented in gromacs and summed for each frame. In order to obtain the PE for each conformational state of sildenafil, the reweighting scheme discussed in the previous section was implemented, where instead of recovering a 1D probability distribution of conformers, a 2D histogram of conformer structure with an associated PE was calculated.[30,31]

Results

The following sections summarise the analysis carried out on sildenafil conformers in the gas phase, as well as on the conformational rearrangements of sildenafil occurring in the crystal bulk and in solution. The results are organised as follows. First, the conformational freedom of sildenafil in the crystal bulk is reviewed by considering the torsional angle distribution obtained from MD simulations of forms I and II. Next, the results obtained from the clustering algorithm are reported, along with drawing a comparison between structures in the gas phase and those in the solid. The last section reports on the equilibrium distribution of sildenafil conformers in different solvents, obtained with the aid of WTmetaD, along with a breakdown of their corresponding free energy into enthalpy and entropy contributions.

Conformational Rearrangements in the Crystal Bulk

The conformational rearrangement of sildenafil was first investigated for the case of a molecule in the crystal bulk in each of the two polymorphic forms. As mentioned, each polymorph contains two conformational isomers of the molecule. A probability distribution of each torsional angle representative of the conformational state adopted by sildenafil in the solid was obtained, which enables to gain insight into the degree of conformational freedom available

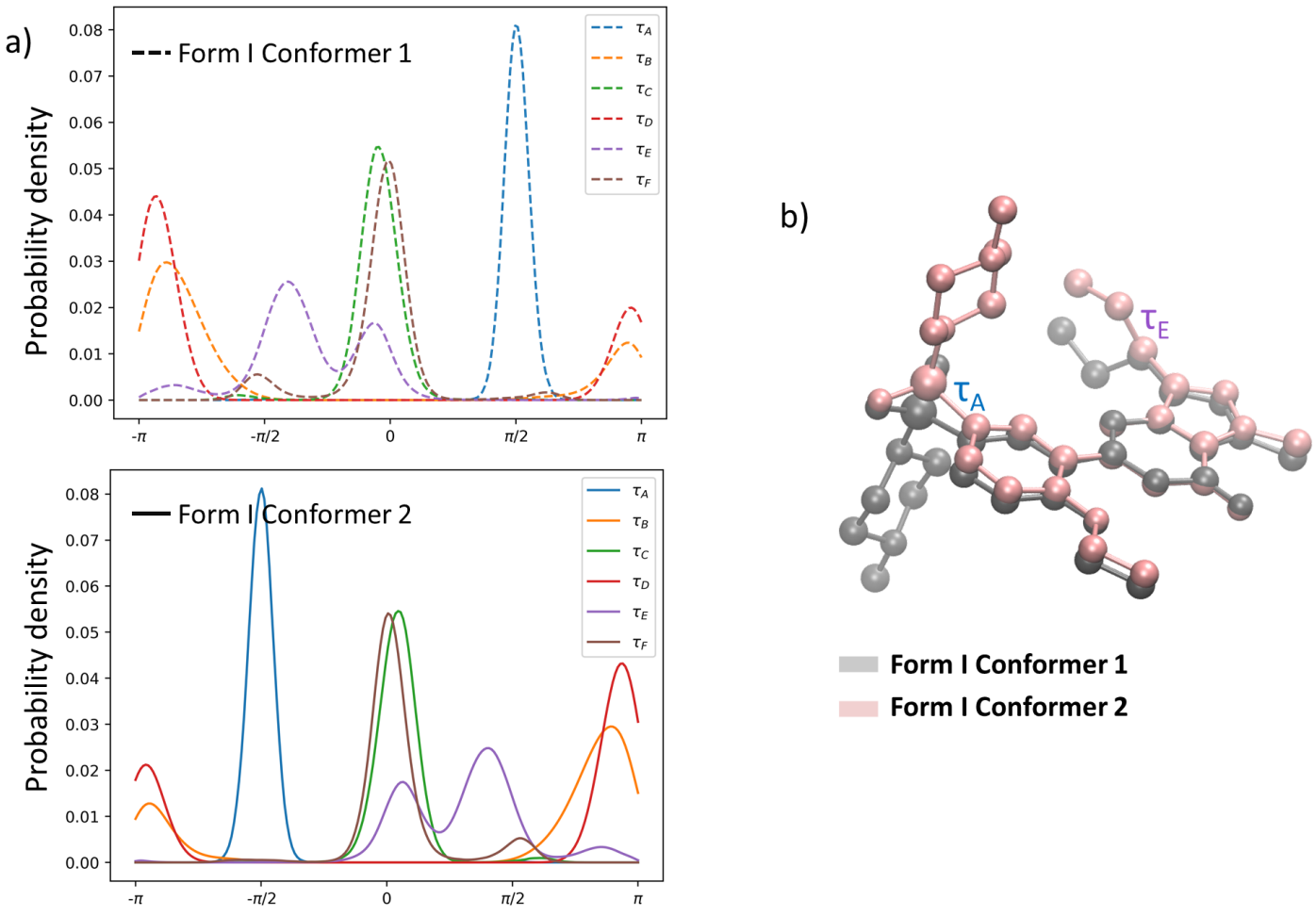


Figure 3: a) Probability density plots of each torsional angle for crystal conformers 1 and 2 obtained from a 10 ns MD simulation of form I sildenafil. b) Image of crystal form I conformers 1 and 2, obtained from the *.cif*, generated with VMD, where hydrogen atoms are removed for simplicity.

in each crystal form.

The results reveal that while several of the dihedral angles of sildenafil are completely restrained by the crystal packing, a surprising amount of flexibility is accessible to the rest. A probability distribution of each torsional angle for crystal conformers 1 and 2 in form I is shown in Figure 3a. In the figure, a narrow and mono-modal distribution corresponds to each of the torsional angles τ_A, τ_C and τ_F, shown respectively in blue, green and brown. A mild degree of conformational adjustment is associated with torsional angles τ_B (in orange) and τ_D (in red) which are both distributed around $\pm\,\pi$. These torsional angles are associated with adjacent substituents on the phenyl ring, suggesting that the rearrangement is possibly related to releaving steric hindrance. The highest degree of rotational freedom is observed in the case of torsional angle τ_E, shown in purple, representing the rotation of the propanyl substituent of the pyrazole ring (see Figure 1), displaying a multi-modal distribution. The flexibility of τ_E reveals a moderate degree of conformational rearrangement available to the conformer, despite the restrictive environment traditionally associated with a crystal. This observation has been addressed by Barbas et al.[16] who have recorded the presence of a dynamic disorder in the propyl groups at room temperature in form I, which disappears at temperatures lower than 100K. The authors justify this observation with the fact that these functional groups do not establish strong intermolecular interactions with the surrounding atoms within the crystal, resulting in a moderate degree of flexibility in the chain.

Analysing the torsional angle distributions of each of the two conformers found within the crystal structure of form I reveals that they are conformational isomers, where a rotation along τ_A and τ_E can convert conformer 1 into conformer 2, as shown in Figure 3b. According to the results obtained from the MD simulation of form I, the internal rearrangement of crystal conformer 2 displays an identical behaviour as to that of conformer 1.

Similarly, the conformational freedom of sildenafil in form II was analysed through an unbiased MD simulation. A comparison of the probability distribution of each torsional angle of sildenafil between form I and form II reveals a similar conformational configuration in the two structures, with the only difference being a marginally lower flexibility of τ_E in form II compared to that observed in form I. A detailed comparison between the conformers in each form is provided in Section C of the Supporting Information. An experimental comparison between the two crystal forms is provided by Barbas et al.[17] who make a similar observation to the one reported here, and stress that any differences between conformers in the two crystals can be classified as conformational *readjustments* of the same gas phase conformer, validating the conclusions made on the basis of our MD simulations. As mentioned, the probability distribution of torsional angle τ_E, associated with the rearrangement of the pronanyl group, shows that the degree of rearrangement is counterintuitively *lower* in form II compared to form I, despite the presence of larger structural voids in the former. The experimental publication does not report measurements of the degree of disorder in form II, however the authors speculate that the conformational rearrangement of the propanyl groups will be dominated by a drive to keep the cavities in the structure empty, which could explain the conformational behaviour observed in the MD simulation of form II.

Structure Clustering in the Gas Phase

This section reports on the results obtained from implementing a data clustering algorithm in order to group structures from an MD trajectory of sildenafil in the gas phase and identify characteristic conformational configurations. A trajectory of a molecule in vacuum was chosen for this purpose as in the absence of solvent effects the internal rearrangement of the molecule is unhindered and thorough sampling of all possible molecular configurations can be achieved efficiently. This allows to consider the full conformational space of sildenafil in the clustering procedure. Such approach has the potential to provide a more meaningful and robust method

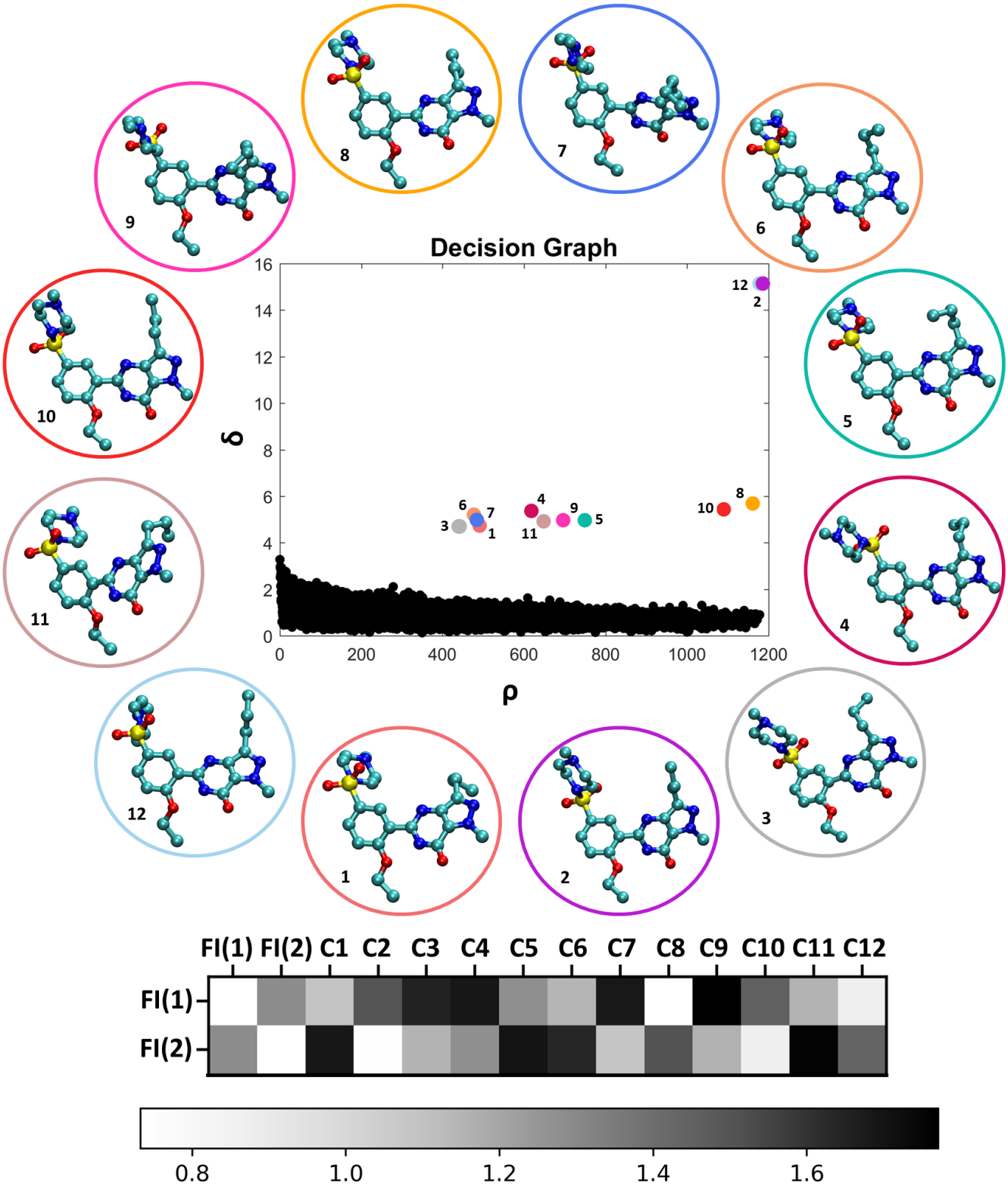


Figure 4: Decision graph of the structure clustering performed on the trajectory in the gas phase. The circled structures represent the cluster centres. The figure below represents the distance matrix between distributions of conformers 1 and 2 in the crystal and the identified from the algorithm cluster centres.

of identifying representative conformational isomers over methods which rely on generating conformers thorough random search and local minima strategies. By considering the free energy profile of each torsional angle in the gas phase, as discussed in Section B of the SI, all possible combinations of structural local minima of the molecule in torsional angle space is estimated to be 144. However, in reality, each local minimum comprises of an ensemble of configurations, meaning that 144 structures is a rather conservative estimate, and in practice, there is a swarm of possible stable molecular configurations. For that reason, failing to explore the collective variable space thoroughly encounters the risk of missing out important structures due to the sheer number of available configurations, even for systems of moderate flexibility.

A typical output of the clustering algorithm is a decision graph, displaying all data points as a function of their density ρ (number of neighbours) and distance from the nearest point of higher density δ (See Eq. 2 and 3). When applied, the clustering algorithm determined 12 cluster centres as shown in the decision graph in Figure 4. Each cluster centre corresponds to the most representative conformer structure for those belonging to a cluster (core and halo). A visual representation of the molecular shape corresponding to each cluster centre is displayed around the decision graph. The conformers identified at this stage are labelled C1 to C12, each of which has an associated characteristic fingerprint in torsional angle space as discussed in Section D of the Methods. All fingerprints can be found in Section D of the SI.

Before proceeding further into the analysis of the conformational population of sildenafil in solution, it is useful to compare the structures of the cluster centres identified in vacuum and those of the crystal conformers. To this aim, a distance matrix comparing crystal conformer 1 and 2 found in form I and each of the 12 cluster centre structures is generated as shown in Figure 4. In the plot, the colour scale corresponds to the distance in torsional angle space, where white signifies the lowest distance, i.e the most similar structures. The distance matrix was obtained by taking the most probable value for each angle and calculating the distance between points in the 6D space of all dihedrals.

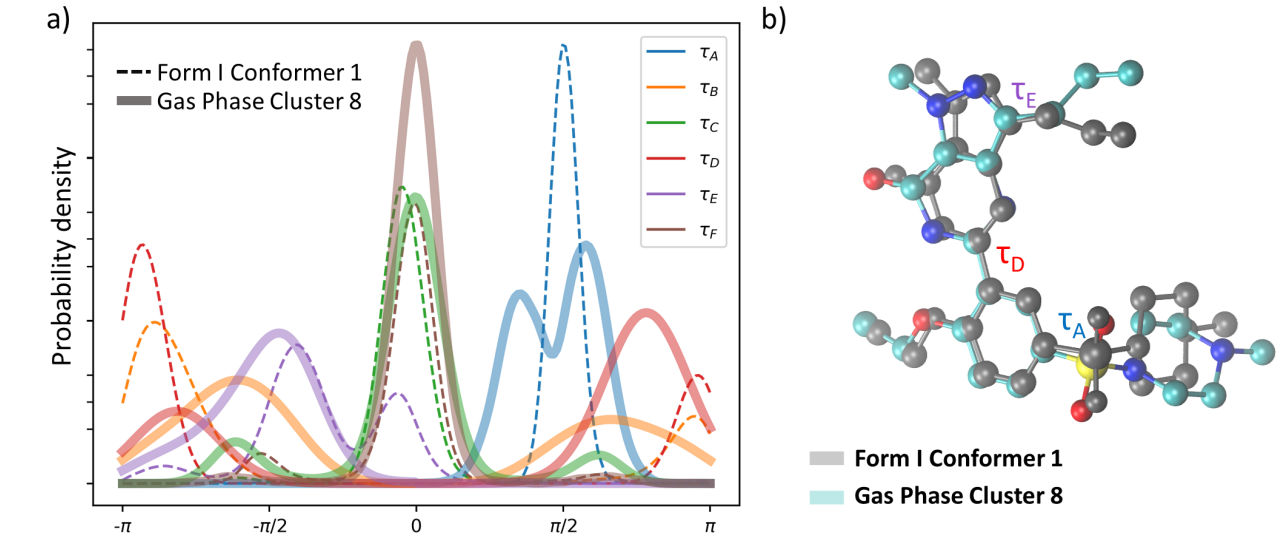
The distance matrix reveals that conformer C8 is the most similar structure to crystal conformer 1, while C2 is the most similar to conformer 2. The fingerprints corresponding to C8 and conformer 1 structures in torsional angle space are visually compared in Figure 5a. The two plots show that the conformational rearrangement of C8 into crystal conformer 1 would involve readjustment in torsional angles τ_A, τ_B and τ_D, which display a comparatively broader distribution in vacuum. The overlap in the distributions demonstrates that the exact crystal conformer is found in the gas phase, and it accounts for only 3% of all configurations. Figure 5b shows a comparison between the cluster centre structure of C8 and crystal conformer 1 as taken from the CCDC database, prior to performing MD. The overlap demonstrates the readjustment in τ_A and τ_D necessary to convert C8 into conformer 1. Torsional angle τ_E differs significantly according to the figure, however, as discussed, it has a moderate flexibility in the solid and it relaxes to a configuration closer to that of C8 during MD as shown in the probability distribution in Figure 5a in purple.

The second most similar to the crystal group of structures are conformers C10 and C12 which relate to respectively conformers C2 and C8 via a rotation of torsional angle τ_E.

Conformational Isomers of Sildenafil in Solution

Equilibrium Probability

MD simulations in combination with WT-metaD were used to investigate the conformational rearrangement of sildenafil in three different solvents - acetonitrile, 1-butanol and toluene. The biased MD trajectory of each solvent case was analysed using the characteristic fingerprints associated with structure clusters C1 to C12, following the procedure outlined in the Methods. The probability of each conformer cluster was generated by accounting for the deposited bias potential through the



	τ_A	τ_B	τ_C	τ_D	τ_E	τ_F
Distance [rad]	0.25	0.88	0.13	0.92	0.19	0.03

Figure 5: a) Probability density of each torsional angle for crystal conformer 1 (dashed lines) and cluster centre 8 (thick line). The numerical distance between distribution peaks is provided in the table below. b) Comparison of crystal conformer 1 structure and the representative structure for C8 cluster group.

reweighting procedure discussed earlier.

The obtained probability for all solvent cases is shown in Figure 6. The results show that, 95% of configurations in solution are accounted for, indicating that the proposed procedure of identifying conformational structures via unsupervised clustering is a fast and reliable way of determining conformational configurations in solution for systems of moderate to high degree of conformational complexity. Examining the distribution, small but significant variations in the probability in different solvents are observed. These findings correlate with what was observed in in our previous work for the case of ibuprofen.[6] Structure types C2 and C8 are found to account for 15 to 20% of the structures in solution each. As discussed, these two groups represent the conformers with a structure closest to the crystal-like configuration of sildenafil. Furthermore, C10 and C12, which relate to C2 and C8 via a rotation along the fast-converting torsional angle τ_E, each account for further a 15% of conformational isomers in solution. Therefore, given the high flexibility of τ_E even within the crystal structures, overall 60 to 70% of the structures found in solution resemble configurations close to those observed in the crystal, inferring that at the crystal-solution interface 30% of structures will have to encounter a more significant conformational rearrangement to adopt a crystal-like configuration and promote crystal nucleation or growth.

Enthalpy and Entropy Contributions to Conformational Stability

In order to gain further insight into the conformational isomerism of sildenafil in solution, the free energy ΔG of each state is calculated, along with a breakdown into potential energy and entropy. In Figure 7 the relative free energy of each state with respect to structure C2 for each solvent can be found in blue. As expected, the free energy difference between the four structures dominating the probability density plot - C2, C8, C10 and C12 is less than 1 kJ/mol for all solvents. The difference in free energy between the latter group and the rest of the structures varies between 2.5 and 5.5 kJ/mol, with the exception of C6 for the

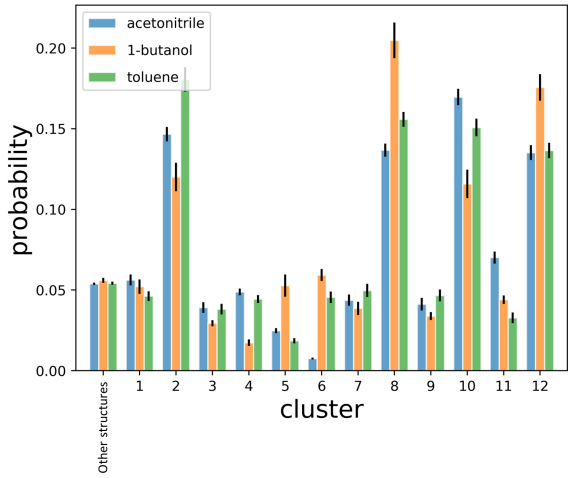


Figure 6: Probability of each conformer configuration C1-C12 along with crystal conformer 1 and crystal conformer 2 for all three solvents.

case of acetonitrile. Despite the minor variations in ΔG between different solvent cases however, the potential energy and entropy reveal more significant differences induced by the solvent. The relative potential energy difference (with respect to C2) rarely exceeds 5 kJ/mol in the case of acetonitrile, which also translates into minor entropic contributions in most states. The exception is once again state C6 for which the free energy is dominated by configurational entropy. A significantly different observations can be made for the cases of 1-butanol and toluene, where the relative potential energy of states is much larger, varying between 5 and 13 kJ/mol. Equally, entropy contributions in these two solvents are much more substantial than for the case of acetonitrile, indicating that solute - solvent interactions are much more dynamical. This is particularly prominent for the case of 1-butanol and it is possibly related to the inherent flexibility of its aliphatic chain.

Conclusions

In this paper we develop a systematic approach to partition the configuration space of flexible molecules with an arbitrary number of rotatable bonds into conformational macrostates. The approach is based on the development of a distance metric between configurations that incorporates qualitative information on the energetic cost associated to transitions along each degree of freedom, and the subsequent application of unsupervised clustering. We apply this approach to investigate the conformational landscape of sildenafil in the crystal bulk, in the gas phase and in solution. A key aspect of the methodology introduced in this work is that the cluster centres are identified only once, for a reference state in the gas phase. These cluster centres configurations then used to classify configurations sampled in solution. This approach provides a self-consistent identification scheme for clusters in the condensed phase. Using this methodology, 95% of structures in three different solvents are unambiguously assigned to a cluster, demonstrating the effectiveness of the proposed classification procedure. We demonstrate that this classification strategy can be coupled with reweighting strategies to compute the free energy of conformational states and to further decompose it into its enthalpy and entropy contributions. This analysis leads to new insights into the role of solvent in the definition of the conformational landscape of an organic molecule. It is found that, while the relative free energy variation between states in different solvents is limited, solvents cases 1-butanol and toluene cause an increase in the entropic contribution to the conformational free energy. Combining this approach with existing strategies for studying effects of conformational rearrangements on processes can prove invaluable

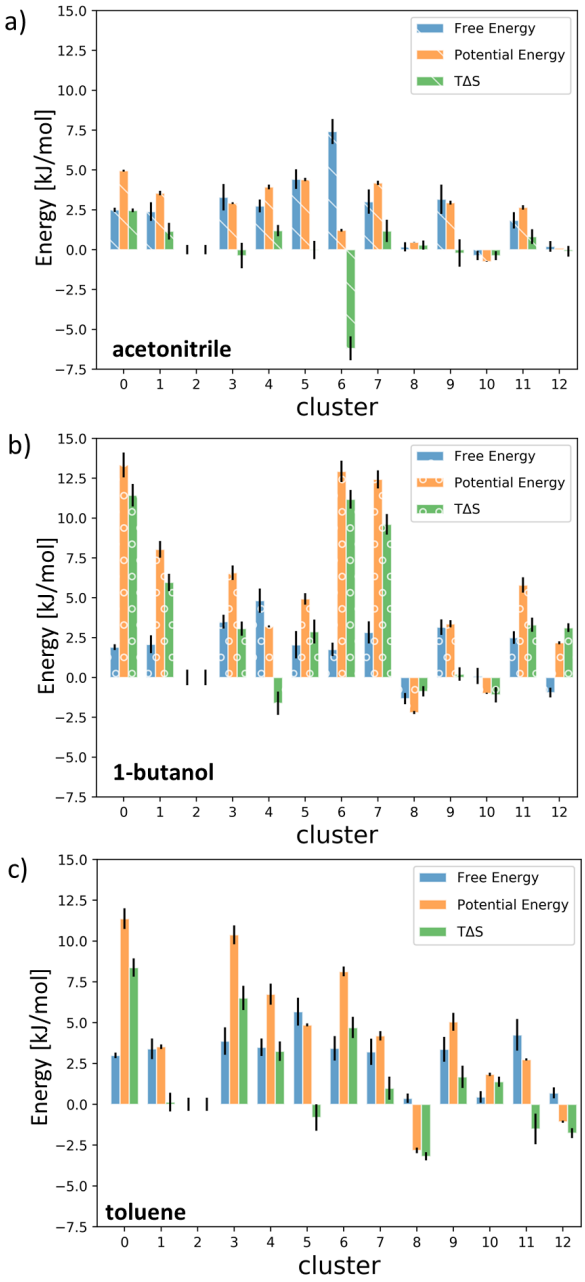


Figure 7: Relative free energy, potential energy and entropy of each cluster configuration with respect to C2 for the case of a) acetonitrile, b) 1-butanol and c) toluene.

in understanding the effect of conformational isomerism in the process of crystal nucleation, growth and dissolution for systems of any size and level of conformational complexity.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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