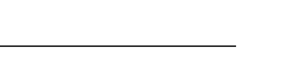

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The shadow of war: Parental competitive victimhood and children's contact intentions in two post-accord societies

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Abstract

The effects of political violence are felt across generations; for example, extent of parental competitive victimhood (feeling that one's ingroup was relatively more victimised during the conflict) predicts adolescent's intergroup discrimination. We extend that research to children, born a generation after the height of violence. Participants were 223 family dyads with children aged 7–11 (M = 9.05, SD = 1.30; 52.4% female): Croatia (n = 82) and Republic of North Macedonia (RNM: n = 141), equally split by group status (i.e., Croatia: Croats/Serbs; RNM: Macedonian/Albanian). Parents reported on competitive victimhood while children reported on intergroup contact intentions (e.g., shared education initiatives). Moderation analysis across sites found a significant status by competitive victimhood interaction; increased parental competitive victimhood was associated with decreased contact intentions among minority, but not majority, children. We review site-specific findings in relation to their historical context, concluding with the implications for shared education, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

KEYWORDS
children, competitive victimhood, Croatia, intergroup conflict, peacebuilding, reconciliation, Republic of North Macedonia

1 | INTRODUCTION

Following the declaration of ceasefires and the signing of peace accords, settings of protracted conflict often endure deep divisions across group lines (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Mac Ginty, 2014). Post-accord societies remain affected by persistent intergroup hostility, which can at times trigger the recurrence of violence (Hegre et al., 2017; Monaghan & Shirlow, 2011). Indeed, the relapse rate of armed conflict has increased gradually since the 1960s; with approximately 60% of conflicts reoccurring within 5 years of the initial cessation of violence (Bosetti et al., 2017; Caffel & Masser, 2020). This 'conflict trap' (Hegre et al., 2017) underscores the need for research into the recurrent nature of intergroup conflict and, in particular, the role of the post-accord generation (Taylor, 2020). When living in conflict-affected settings, children mature and develop in environments plagued by continuous tension and lingering social division (Nasie & Diesendruck, 2020), despite the formal end to political conflict (Reidy et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017). Yet, children should not be simply perceived as passive victims or violent perpetrators but rather as peacebuilders with the potential to interrupt cycles of intergroup conflict (Taylor, 2020; Taylor & McKeown, 2021). Given the potentially crucial role played by the younger generation in post-accord contexts, emerging research has

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begun to examine the antecedents of children's propensity for peace and reconciliation and their constructive contributions to restoring local and national intergroup relations (Kosic & Livi, 2012; Kosic et al., 2012; Taylor, O'Driscoll, et al., 2022).

1.1 | The developmental peacebuilding model

The developmental peacebuilding model (DPM; Taylor, 2020) integrates a developmental psychology lens with peace studies, offering a framework for understanding youth prosociality in fragile post-conflict contexts, and the implications of such outgroup prosocial behaviours for promoting wider social cohesion and peace (Taylor, 2020). Children can encourage peace at various levels of the social ecology through their support for symbolic, material and relational actions which aim to produce more positive intergroup engagement (Taylor, O'Driscoll, et al., 2022). For example, in the microsystem, prosocial behaviours might involve positive contact with an outgroup child (Louis et al., 2019).

In this way, the DPM understands peacebuilding as future-focused, extending beyond historical wrong-doings, to focus on the present-day with an eye on the horizon; in other words, constructive actions which can pave the way for structural peace at the macrosystem level (Taylor, 2020; Taylor & Bähr, 2022; Taylor, O'Driscoll, et al., 2022). Focusing on the post-accord generation, the DPM builds on reconciliation of the past towards the identification of psychological processes through which children can drive the peacebuilding agenda forward (Noor, Brown, et al., 2008; Taylor, 2020).

Integrating a social ecological perspective, the DPM recognises that children's support for peacebuilding is shaped by diverse socialising agents (e.g., family, peers, schools) and contextual factors (e.g., group status, history of conflict). The need for cross-cultural research is also recognised as integral to identifying the universal and unique predictors of youth peacebuilding and reconciliation across different macrosystems (Bornstein, 2017; Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2023; Nielsen & Haun, 2016; Taylor, 2020). Comparing two post-conflict settings, the current study will explore the extent to which parental competitive victimhood is related to children's intergroup contact intentions, and if conflict rival group status moderates this relationship.

1.2 | Competitive victimhood

A common occurrence in settings of protracted conflict is that interpretations of the past influence contemporary attitudes and behaviours (Voci et al., 2015). The present is the lens through which groups interpret the past; historic hostilities are maintained within the collective memory and can hinder peaceable co-existence and reconciliation (Bilali et al., 2016; Voci et al., 2015). Competitive victimhood stems from shared narratives based on actual and reimagined instances of ingroup suffering at the hand of the conflict rival group (De Guissmé & Licata, 2017; Green et al., 2017).

Competitive processes are central to all intergroup relations, with competition being particularly relevant among groups marked by a history of violent conflict over territory or social resources (Noor et al., 2012). The concept of competitive victimhood (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008;Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008) sheds light on claims of collective victimhood, which are rooted in groups' subjective experiences of the conflict (Demirel, 2023). Whereas collective victimhood arises from concrete experiences of being targeted as members of a group (Noor et al., 2017), competitive victimhood refers to the tendency to perceive one's own group as having suffered proportionately more than the outgroup (Demirel, 2023; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008). Competitive victimhood occurs when the ingroup is perceived as the greater genuine victim of the conflict, whereas the outgroup is regarded primarily as an unwarranted perpetrator of violent wrongdoings (Andrighetto et al., 2012). This subjective sense of in-group victimisation becomes strongly ingrained in individuals and constitutes an intrinsic feature of their social identity, a feature which perseveres long after the formal cessation of the conflict (Andrighetto et al., 2012).

Possessing a sense of competitive victimhood significantly hinders positive intergroup relations and diminishes support for conflict-reduction or reconciliation policies (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; De Guissmé & Licata, 2017). Competitive victimhood has been recognised as a prime barrier to peace and reconciliation in societies affected by identity-based conflicts (Demirel & Eriksson, 2020; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). A body of post-conflict research demonstrates that competitive victimhood is linked with reduced intergroup forgiveness (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008; Van Tongeren et al., 2014), lower willingness to reconcile (Schori-Eyal et al., 2017), decreased support for nonviolent conflict resolution (Uluğ et al., 2021), lower acknowledgement of ingroup accountability (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Čehajić-Clancy & Brown, 2010) and a greater desire for social distance from outgroup members (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015). Given the pervasive role of competitive victimhood in the continuation of intergroup hostilities (Young & Sullivan, 2016), examining this construct in post-accord societies has potential implications for reconciliation.

1.3 | Group status

Considering that perceptions of low agency and weakness are usually associated with victimhood, it might appear contradictory that both majority and minority groups would compete over victim status (Noor et al., 2017). Yet, obtaining victim status yields benefits; for example, attributing blame to the outgroup elicits support and recognition towards the ingroup from the international community (Bagci et al., 2018; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Noor et al., 2017). For instance, in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants each participate in varying competitive victimhood narratives, whereby both groups focus on the terrorism of the other group, selectively recalling the violence to place the blame on the conflict rival group (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Demirel, 2023). Moreover, competitive

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victimhood plays a functional role in intergroup relations by enhancing ingroup cohesiveness and strengthening identification with the ingroup (Bagci et al., 2018; Noor et al., 2017). The potential benefits are such that groups may engage in competitive victimhood even when clear boundaries between victims and perpetrators are demarcated (e.g., Hutu militias responsible for the mass genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda) (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008). Accordingly, research on competitive victimhood should acknowledge the influence of minority and majority group status on competitive victimhood beliefs, given both the relevant historical and present-day context (Vollhardt et al., 2021).

1.4 | Parental competitive victimhood

War casts a lasting shadow that influences present-day intergroup relations among group members born after the height of the conflict (Li et al., 2023). Most competitive victimhood research focuses on individuals who did not personally experience the conflict and explores how competitive victimhood responses persist despite violence occurring generations ago (Rotella et al., 2013). For example, children acquire a repository of intergroup attitudes and behaviours which mirror those of the community in which they live (Misoska et al., 2019). Living in post-conflict societies, children can develop and share a profound feeling of victimhood regardless of whether they played a direct role or even personally experienced the conflict at all (Green et al., 2017).

Victimhood narratives at the societal level can be transmitted through education, social movements, media and through cultural socialisation processes (e.g., memorials, commemorations, political speeches, museums) (Štambuk et al., 2020; Vollhardt, 2012). At the microsystem level, parents are a particularly powerful socialisation agent of victimhood transmission (Reidy et al., 2015; Štambuk et al., 2020). Parenting in settings plagued by intergroup conflict is challenging; parents must support their children in making sense of the past violence whilst also tackling current problems arising from prevailing group division (Taylor et al., 2019). Parents' stories of the past shape how their children perceive group membership and victimhood, which successively influence their attitudes and behaviours towards the conflict rival group (Taylor et al., 2019). Parental accounts of victimhood not only comprise direct narratives of suffering but also encompass wider themes of desirable intergroup interactions and the salience of one's group membership (Štambuk et al., 2020). As a primarily interpersonal process, the transmission of parental competitive victimhood guides children's responses to sustained intergroup tensions and threats, which may delay peacebuilding in the long term (Taylor et al., 2019).

1.5 | Intergroup contact

Intergroup contact is a powerful strategy for ameliorating intergroup relations (Boin et al., 2021; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) details conditions (i.e., equal status, common goals, cooperation, authority support) under which intergroup contact reduces prejudice through increased tolerance and mutual acceptance (Swart et al., 2011; Zagrean et al., 2022). The psychological processes involved in reconciliation have often been studied through the lens of theories on intergroup contact, with contact cited as a potentially transformative means of uniting children from opposite sides of the conflict (Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2023; Kosic & Senehi, 2009; Kosic et al., 2012; Tropp et al., 2002; Taylor, Tomašić Humer, et al., 2022). In line with the DPM, positive intergroup contact is a form of prosociality that could be a potential antecedent of youth peacebuilding in post-conflict settings (Corbett et al., 2023; Louis et al., 2019). Meaningful contact has been linked with increased empathy and trust across post-conflict contexts (Hewstone et al., 2006; McKeown & Taylor, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Turner et al., 2013), which in turn can pave the way for interpersonal prosocial behaviours towards rival outgroups (Andrighetto et al., 2012; Taylor, 2020), and increased civic engagement and support for peacebuilding in youth (McKeown & Taylor, 2017).

Despite the potential for intergroup contact to promote better intergroup relations, post-conflict settings are often highly divided. Limited intergroup contact further inhibits opportunities for outgroup prosocial behaviour (Andrighetto et al., 2012; Boin et al., 2021; Taylor, 2020). For example, although Protestants and Catholics in Belfast often live in close proximity (Kauff et al., 2021), GPS tracking data demonstrates limited shared use of public areas, facilities and street networks (Dixon et al., 2020). In socially divided post-conflict settings, indirect contact (e.g., online contact) could be an alternative means of bringing rival groups together (this point feeds into our experimental design; Boin et al., 2021). Consistent with the DPM's emphasis on children's agency, identifying the types of indirect contact in which children willingly choose to participate (vs. a school requirement), is a key consideration for peacebuilding.

In addition to physical divisions, competitive victimhood could be another salient barrier to intergroup contact intentions; for example, among Albanians adults in Kosovo competitive victimhood was linked to a lower willingness for outgroup contact through lower empathy and trust (Voca et al., 2022). Growing up in settings of strong intergroup competition, children's own experiences and parental narratives of victimisation may hinder their willingness to engage in intergroup contact and increase their desire for social distance from the outgroup (Misoska et al., 2019; Taylor, 2020). Whereas intergroup contact encompasses experiences beyond the family environment (e.g., at school, with peers), children may conform to parental norms of competitive victimhood due to needs for social identification and ingroup approval (e.g., parental approval; Zagrean et al., 2022). Moreover, social penalties for violating group norms of loyalty (Abrams et al., 2014) are often more pronounced in conflict settings and may discourage children's intergroup contact intentions (Taylor, 2020). Accordingly, we expect that parental competitive victimhood narratives conveying threat/danger could have implications for children's intergroup contact intentions in the current study.

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1.6 | The current study

GIven the potential power of contact for improving intergroup relations and encouraging reconciliation, it is imperative to tease apart the associations between parental competitive victimhood and conflict rival group status on children's intergroup contact intentions (i.e., willingness to engage in a shared education initiative). To ascertain the intergenerational impact of intergroup conflict, this study extends past research with adolescents (Štambuk et al., 2020) to focus on children currently growing up in two post-accord societies in Europe: Croatia (especially the region of Eastern Croatia) and the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Children in each setting were born after the height of political violence but are raised in relatively divided societies.

The RNM is marked by interethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians (majority) and ethnic Albanians (minority), despite the cessation of violence in 2001. The post-conflict 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement introduced a variety of constitutional and institutional changes; including the right of ethnic groups to receive higher education in their own language and the provisions for any language in municipalities spoken by over 20% of the population (e.g., the Albanian language) to become co-official with the Macedonian language (Piacentini, 2019; Sielska, 2018). Both Macedonians and Albanians have ethnocentric views of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004) and, even after 20 years, there are still issues that seem contested and divisive like the use of languages, symbols, political and social rights, etc. (Sielska, 2018). Contact between Macedonians and Albanians remains limited, and intergroup relations are characterised by intolerance, suspicion and mistrust (Tomovska Misoska et al., 2019). The country's school system is both a product of and an outcome of the societal divisions. Minority students attend classes in their own language using the legal opportunities given to them. The current arrangements leave little scope for unplanned contact between Macedonian and Albanian children within the schools, and the system itself lacks capacity for promotion of more positive mutual interactions and improvement of the interethnic relations (Petrovska-Beska, et al., 2009).

In Croatia (especially the city of Vukovar and surrounding areas), following the end of political violence in 1995, relations between Croats (majority) and Serbs (minority) are marred by the legacy of war, with the resulting anger, resentment and hatred inhibiting peaceful coexistence of the two groups (Kosic & Senehi, 2009; Kosic et al., 2012). A major barrier to social cohesion is the variance between Croats' and Serbs' interpretations of conflict-related events. Both groups exhibit high levels of competitive victimhood; Croats' competitive victimhood beliefs are shaped by recent war victimisation, whereas Serbs feel victimised by the contemporary discrimination they face in post-war Croatia (Štambuk et al., 2020).

Through comparative work across these two sites, the current study aims to shed light on the similarities and differences in parental competitive victimhood processes across both majority and minority groups, or conflict rivals, with implications for reconciliation and future peacebuilding. The use of group status as a moderator variable is exploratory in nature. Ongoing division along group lines underscores the relevance of group membership in everyday life (Štambuk et al., 2020), such that minority and majority status groups might have different responses to intergroup contact in light of their groups' histories and present-day experiences (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). The current study will thus investigate potential differences in competitive victimhood beliefs and contact intentions based on minority or majority group status. The primary hypothesis is that parental perceived competitive victimhood is related to child intergroup contact intentions and that conflict rival group status will moderate this relationship. Secondary analyses will also compare the moderating role of group status across the historic minority and majority groups within each of the two post-conflict settings.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Participants were 223 family dyads with children aged 7–11 ($M = 9.05$, $SD = 1.30$; 52.4% female): Croatia ($n = 82$) and RNM ($n = 141$) which were part of a larger project with ethical approval (EPS 20_190) from Queen's University Belfast conducted in Spring 2021. The preregistration and full list of measures for the larger study can be found at https://osf.io/cnk37. The analyses for the present paper were not preregistered. Statistical power for the primary analysis was estimated in InteractionPoweR (Baranger et al., 2022) using Cohen's guidelines for effect sizes (Cohen, 1992). Given a small effect size ($\beta = .1$) between predictor and outcome, moderator and outcome, and predictor and moderator, and a small-to-medium effect size ($\beta = .2$) between the interaction term and outcome, a sample size of 200 would be adequate to detect such effects at 80% power. For the secondary analysis, within site, assuming the same small direct effects, the sample in the RNM would have 80% power to detect a small-to-medium interaction effect ($\beta = .23$), while the sample in Croatia could detect a medium-effect interaction effect ($\beta = .32$). Families were recruited primarily through local schools and social media. Parents completed measures online via Qualtrics during and parents provided consent. The child's session was conducted via Zoom, due to COVID-19 public health guidelines, by a trained research assistant from the local context. Each family received a book voucher equivalent to the value of 5 Kuna (Croatia) or 500 denars (RNM) as thanks for their participation.

2.2 | Measures

Parental competitive victimhood was adapted from Štambuk et al. (2020). Parents responded to two items presented in a randomised order: (1) 'when you think about the past, please indicate on the slider how victimised the [MAJORITY (Croatian, Macedonian)] community was' and (2) 'when you think about the past, please indicate on the slider how victimised the [MINORITY (Serbian, Albanian)] community was'. Responses were given on a 0 to 100 sliding scale. A competitive victimhood score was created by subtracting perceived victimisation of the

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TABLE 1 Mean and standard deviations of the main study variables by setting and group status.

	Croatia *M* (*SD*)		RNM *M* (*SD*)	
	Minority	Majority	Minority	Majority
Parental competitive victimhood	14.30 (21.22)	46.64 (34.69)	61.10 (28.61)	44.38 (36.31)
Child intergroup contact intentions	2.48 (1.36)	3.89 (2.61)	1.40 (1.09)	1.61 (.97)

outgroup from perceived victimisation of the ingroup; higher scores indicated that a parent perceived their own group was relatively more victimised (range = −100 to 100).

Child intergroup contact intentions were adapted from Vezzali et al. (2015) and Taylor and McKeown (2021). Children were told that their school was participating in a joint education programme that would bring children from the (relevant) minority and majority groups together. The exact language differed (see Appendix A in the Supporting Information) according to what was most familiar for a particular site: Croatia (joint extracurricular activities) and RNM (interethnic integration activities). Children knew contact would be virtual (i.e., that they would communicate with a child from the outgroup through the computer, due to public health guidelines at the time). They were asked to sign up for up to 10 sessions; for example, during school lunch break and after school during a school week. Scores ranged from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating higher intergroup contact intentions.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary analyses

All moderations were carried out using the SPSS PROCESS Macro, Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). A standard error and covariance matrix estimator was applied (HC3) when the assumption of homoscedasticity had been violated (Long & Ervin, 2000). Continuous variables were mean centred, and values were conditioned at the mean ± 1SD.

First, moderation analysis was conducted to examine the potential influence of group status and site on parental competitive victimhood. The conditional effects of group status, according to site, were as follows: in Croatia, majority participants reported greater competitive victimhood than minority participants ($b = 32.44$, $SE = 6.90$, $p < .001$ [95% CI: 18.74, 45.95]), in RNM, minority participants reported greater competitive victimhood than the majority ($b = -16.72$, $SE = 5.16$, $p = .001$ [95% CI: −26.88, −6.56]); see Table 1 for means and standard deviations and Figure 1a for graphical depiction.

Second, the analysis was repeated with children's intergroup contact intentions as the dependent variable. The conditional effects of group status on contact intentions were as follows: on average, in Croatia, children from the majority had greater contact intentions than the minority ($b = 1.42$, se (HC3) = 0.44, $p = .002$ [95% CI: 0.55, 2.29]). There were no differences in average contact intentions between the majority and minority in RNM ($b = .21$, $se = 0.16$, $p = .19$ [95% CI: −0.10, 0.52]) (Figure 1b).

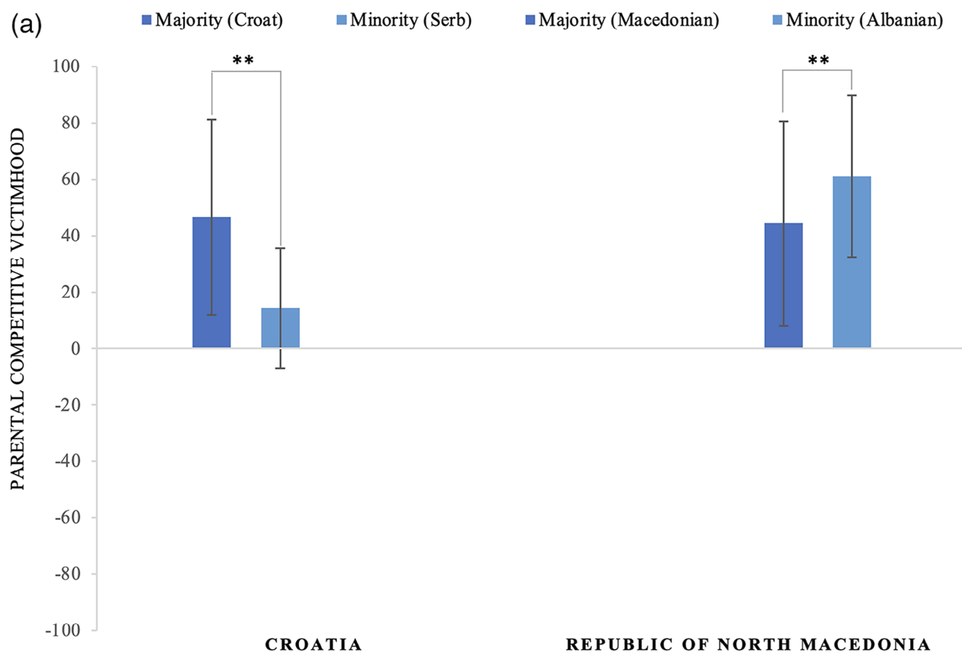
3.2 | Primary analysis

First, we examined if parental competitive victimhood predicted children's intergroup contact intentions, and if any such effect was moderated by group status. Across both sites, there was a significant interaction between parental competitive victimhood and group status ($b = 0.02$, se (HC3) = 0.01, $p = .007$ [95% CI: 0.005, 0.029]). Conditional effects indicated that, for the minority, increasing parental competitive victimhood was related to decreased contact intentions ($b = -0.02$, se (HC3) = 0.003, $p < .001$ [95% CI: −0.02, −0.01]). Yet, for the majority, parental competitive victimhood was unrelated to contact intentions ($b < 0.00$, se (HC3) = 0.005, $p = .95$ [95% CI: −0.01, 0.011]) (Figure 2).

Second, the analysis was repeated within site to determine if these patterns were consistent across different settings. In Croatia, there was a main effect of group status only, such that children from the majority were more willing to engage in contact than those from the minority ($b = 1.60$, se (HC3) = 0.52, $p = .003$ [95% CI: 0.55, 2.64]) (Figure 3a). In RNM; there was a significant interaction between parental competitive victimhood and group status ($b = 0.01$, $se = 0.01$, $p = .041$ [95% CI: 0.00, 0.02]) such that a negative relation was present for the minority ($b = -0.01$, $se = 0.004$, $p = .005$ [95% CI: −0.022, −0.004]), but no significant relation for the majority ($b = -0.001$, $se = 0.003$, $p = .62$ [95% CI: −0.008, 0.005]) (Figure 3b). A related analysis using secondary data from Croatia ($N = 155$) was conducted to further explore these findings (see Appendix B in the Supporting Information).

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study examined the transgenerational relevance of parental competitive victimhood for children's intergroup contact intentions, a key aspect of reconciliation and peacebuilding, across two post-accord societies. Across the entire sample (both Croatia and the RNM), there was a significant group status by competitive victimhood interaction; higher levels of parental competitive victimhood were related to lower contact intentions among minority group children, but unrelated to contact intentions among majority group children. In



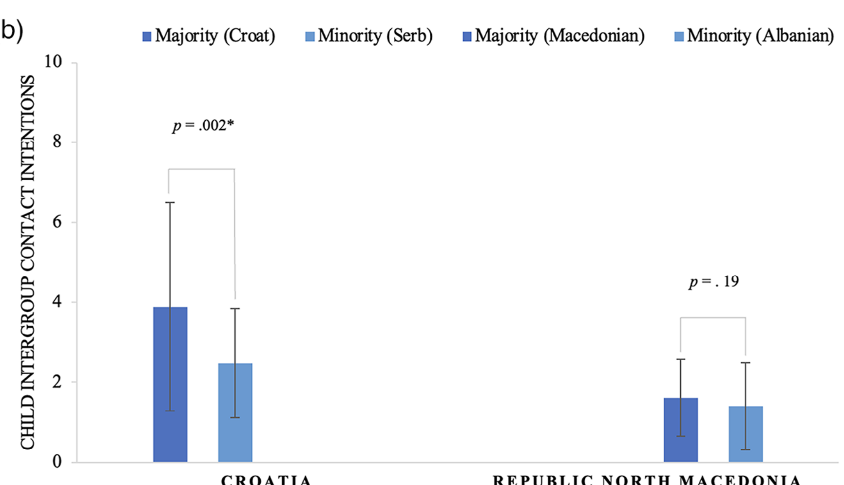


FIGURE 1 The interaction between group status and site on (a) average parental competitive victimhood (−100 to 100) in Croatia ($n = 82$) and RNM ($n = 141$) and (b) average child intergroup contact intentions (0–10) in Croatia ($n = 82$) and RNM ($n = 141$).

other words, the legacy of competitive victimhood among parents who lived through the height of the conflict appears to have links to their children's present-day willingness to engage with the conflict rival via shared education, among the minority group only.

The finding that parental competitive victimhood was associated with decreased contact intentions among minority, but not majority children, is consistent with some research on intergroup interactions (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2020; Vezzali et al., 2010). For example, in post-conflict settings, ethnic minority groups face differential threats to majority group members. When outnumbered in such settings, minority groups may feel their identity is under threat, denied or discriminated against (Uluğ & Uysal, 2021). Minority groups tend to more closely reflect on their group membership and strive to maintain and distinguish their cultural heritage from the majority (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2020). Linked to the concept of identity threat, minority groups are also acutely conscious of their group's devalued status (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2020) and may avoid intergroup contact to protect themselves from prejudice (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2020; Štambuk et al., 2020; Stephan et al., 2002; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Nevertheless, majority group members may still possess threat perceptions (Mashuri & Van Leeuwen, 2016), such as to their current power and the status quo, symbolic threats to ingroup norms, morals and values (Croucher, 2017; Eskelinen et al., 2022; Mashuri & Van Leeuwen, 2016) or being perceived as prejudiced by the minority group (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005).

Differential threat perceptions are particularly relevant to post-accord settings wherein groups compete over victimisation (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Demirdağ & Hasta, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2012). In

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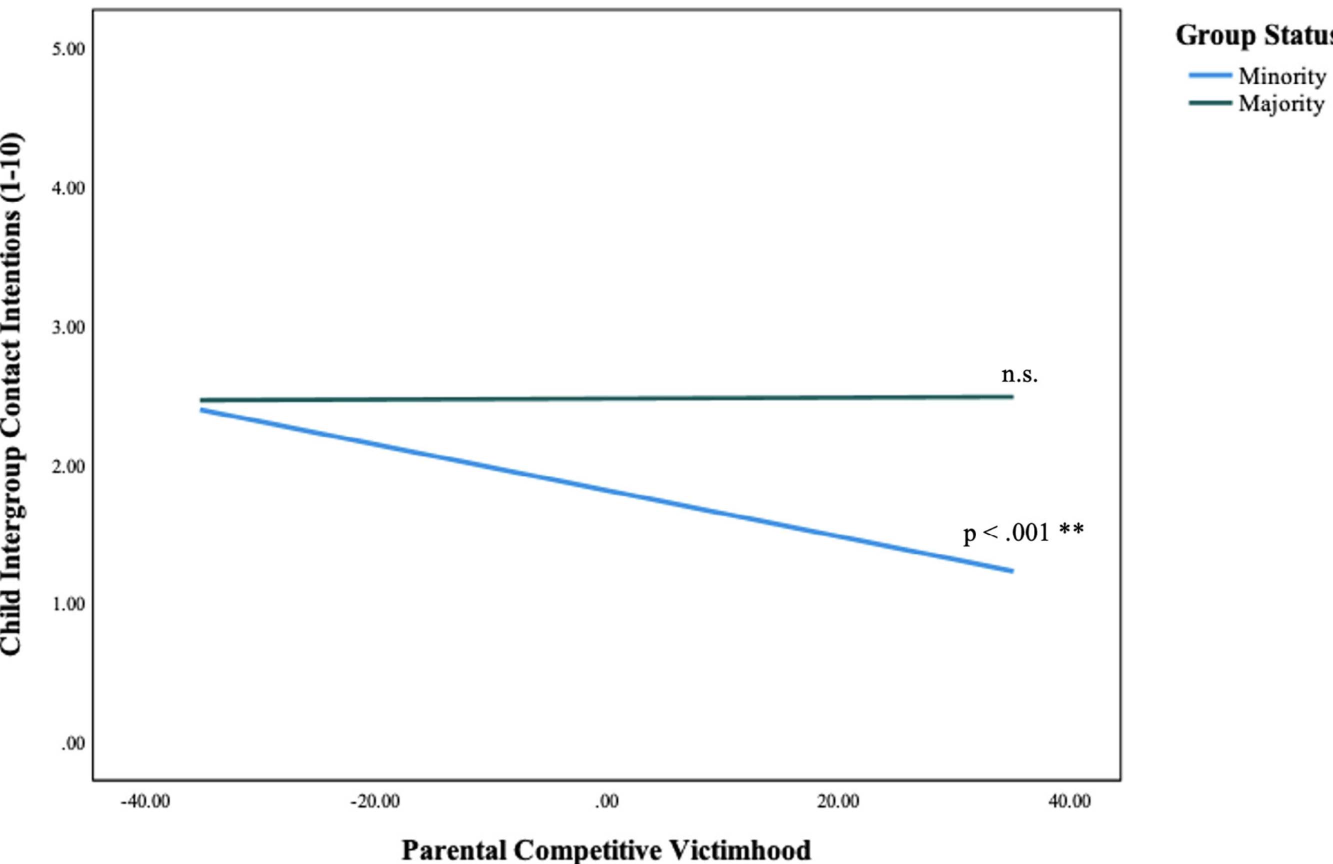

FIGURE 2 The interaction between group status and parental competitive victimhood, on children's contact intentions, across both sites ($n = 223$). Parental competitive victimhood is mean-centred.

the current study, both minority and majority parents expressed competitive victimhood; though, stronger for majority parents in Croatia and minority parents in RNM. Yet, parental competitive victimhood only had a negative relationship with children's contact intentions in the minority group (Serbians and Albanians). This finding may reflect the greater sensitivity to group-based information (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005; Vezzali et al., 2010) or could be due to greater exposure to parental competitive victimhood narratives among minority group children (Uluğ & Uysal, 2021). Accordingly, majority group children may not experience the same sense of threat by exposure to parental competitive victimhood and thus adapt contact intentions, compared to minority children who are socialised to anticipate prejudiced intergroup interactions.

4.1 | Republic of North Macedonia

The moderation analysis was then repeated within each site; the findings held in RNM. There was a significant interaction between parental competitive victimhood and group status, whereby a negative association was present for the minority, but not the majority group.

Given RNM's historical and present-day context, this finding is consistent with integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) which proposes that minority and majority groups have differential views of both realistic threats (e.g., political and economic threats to security, health, wealth and employment) and symbolic threats (e.g., threats to group values, traditions, morals, ideology), based on their group's current status within the post-conflict society (Makashvili et al., 2018). Present-day RNM remains ethnically divided across political parties, education systems, media, cafes, music, municipalities and neighbourhoods (Misoska & Loader, 2021; Piacentini, 2019). The diversity and unbalanced distribution of the population, married with the lack of intergroup contact, has resulted in ongoing tensions as some Macedonians and Albanians have different interpretations and perceptions of conflict-related events and outcomes (i.e., the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement) (Petroska-Beska & Najcevska, 2004). Disagreements largely stem from a failed attempt for exclusive state ownership on the Macedonian side and a failed bid for official co-ownership on the Albanian side (Piacentini, 2019).

Children in RNM are quite competent in understanding the narratives of the adults and intertwining them within their own experience when forming views of the other community, their contact intentions and their interpretations of contact experiences (Tomovska, 2009). Two decades since the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, tensions prevail and children are socialised in the history of interethnic conflict wherein the two groups grapple with competing narratives of outgroup wrongdoings (Taylor et al., 2021). Although both Albanian and Macedonian children possess a strong awareness of outgroup

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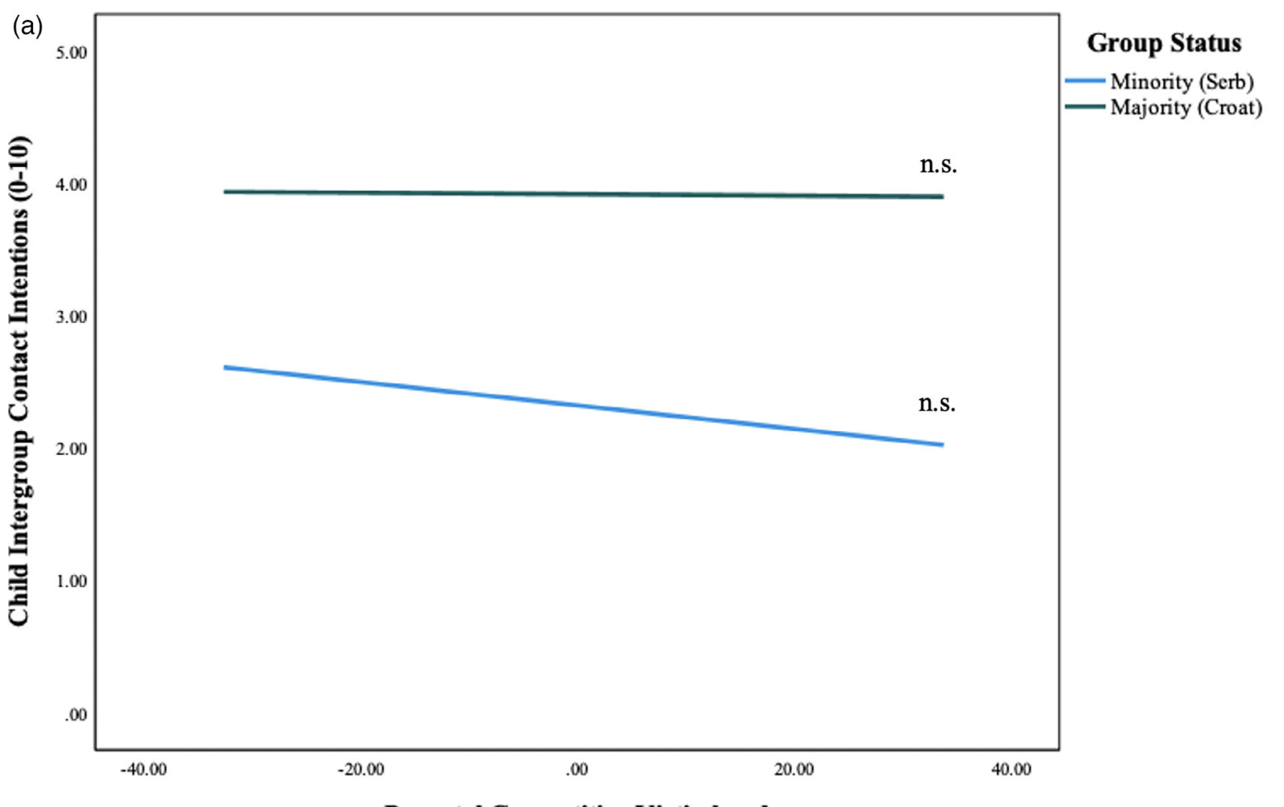

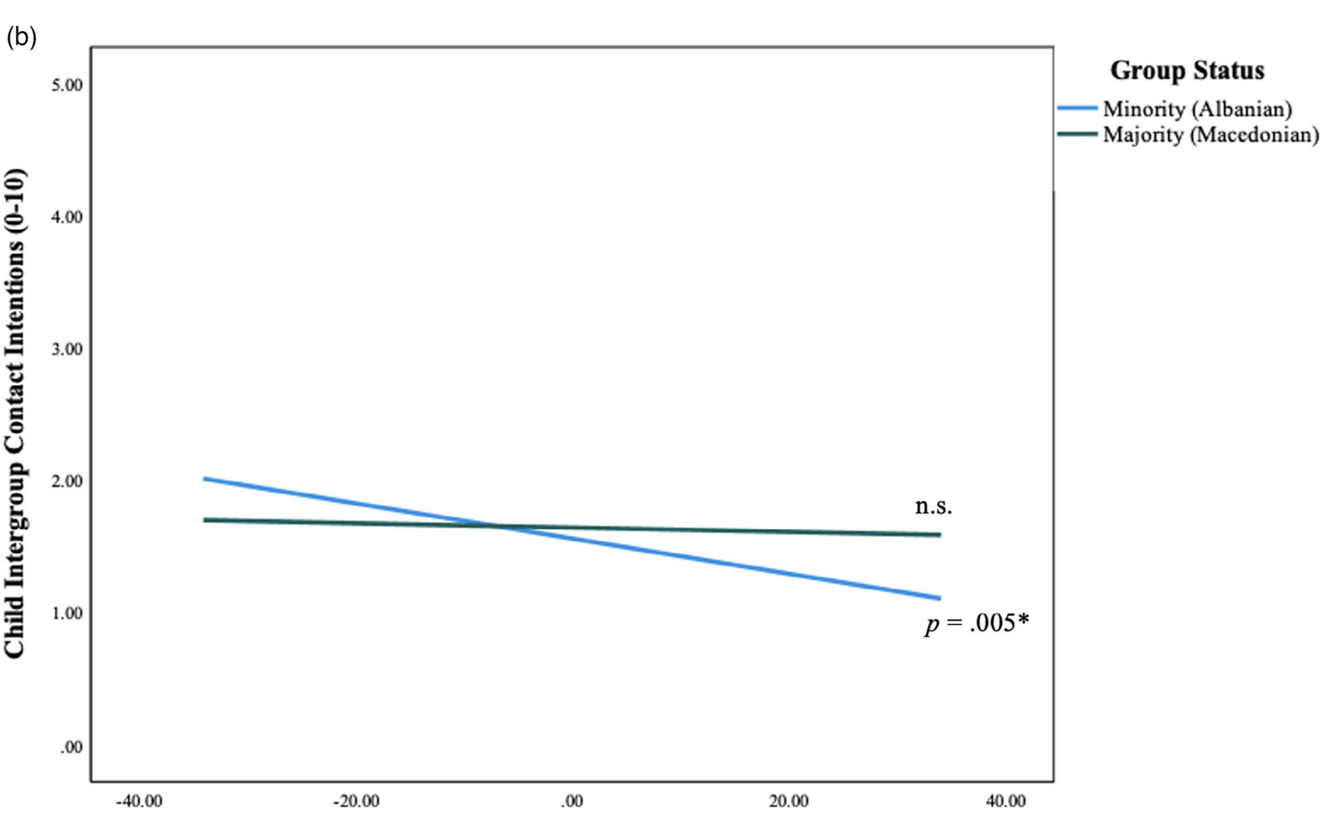

FIGURE 3 The interaction between group status and parental competitive victimhood on children's contact intentions in (a) Croatia only ($N = 82$) and (b) RNM only ($N = 141$).

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symbols, research shows that Albanian children are better at identifying outgroup symbols pertaining to Macedonian traditions and lifestyles (Tomovska Misoska et al., 2020). This awareness could be indicative of Albanian children's minority status by which they are more conscious of group-based differences and more attuned to the characteristics of the majority (Tomovska Misoska et al., 2020). In this way, Albanian children may be more susceptible to parental expressions of competitive victimhood, and consequently more wary of intergroup contact, due to their status as a minority group in this recently independent country.

4.2 | Croatia

Consistent with previous research, Croats reported greater perceived collective victimhood compared to minority Serbs (Jelić et al., 2021; Štambuk et al., 2020). Moreover, recent qualitative research found that Serbian adolescents largely do not discuss the war with their families (Jelić et al., 2021), while all Croatian adolescents reported interest in discussing the war (Jelić et al., 2021). The influence of these family discussions has found that parental competitive victimhood predicted adolescents' tendency to discriminate against the outgroup, among both minority (Serbian) and majority (Croatian) adolescents (Štambuk et al., 2020). The current study, instead, focused on contact intentions, a key building block for reconciliation. For this outcome, there was a main effect of group status only; majority group children expressed greater contact intentions than minority group children, independent of parental competitive victimhood.

To unpack this main effect of group status, we must go beyond divergent narratives of competitive victimhood between Serbs (e.g., displacement in post-Yugoslav states, forced to live as minorities, post-war discrimination) and Croats (e.g., Serbs as war criminals, lack of acknowledgment for Croatian war victimisation) (Keil, 2017), to focus on the lived, present-day experiences of children in Croatia. Children in post-war Croatia are clearly socialised to perceive group status as relevant to their own identity and to that of the outgroup (Štambuk et al., 2020). Division in children's lives is further maintained by an education system separated by ethnicity, with the curriculum offered in either the Croatian or Serbian language (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007). Children's attendance of separate classes means that opportunities to interact with peers from the other group are extremely limited (Taylor, Tomašić Humer, et al., 2022). Accordingly, contact, the core condition for promoting reconciliation, is negligible (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007).

Corresponding to the RNM findings, Serbian children expressed lower contact intentions than Croatian children. This pattern corresponds to evidence that minority groups may be reluctant to socialise with the majority group due to fears of prejudice (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Within the Croatian context, there is some evidence of structural inequalities and discrimination against the Serbian population concerning citizenship, employment, and housing, alongside reports of post-war hostilities at the hands of the Croatian population and authorities (Jelić et al., 2021). Accordingly, Serbian children growing up in a divided society, with limited prior experience of outgroup contact, might be more reluctant to engage in intergroup contact on the basis of their group's lower status within post-accord Croatia. However, we did not formally assess minority and majority group children's perceptions of threat in this study. In fact, our results are not in line with earlier findings of Serbian children expressing more willingness for intergroup contact compared to majority Croatian children (Čorkalio Biruški & Ajduković, 2008). Given these mixed findings across age groups and intergroup outcomes, additional research is needed.

4.3 | Limitations and future research

Framed by the DPM, this study contributed to the competitive victimhood literature by focusing on children born after the height of political violence. Combining both parent-report and child-report measures, this cross-cultural study sheds preliminary light on the transgenerational associations of parental competitive victimhood and the salience of group status on children's intergroup contact intentions with the former conflict rival.

Although performing moderation analyses was a valuable first step in understanding the transgenerational influence of intergroup conflict, the cross-sectional, correlational design of this study restricts our ability to make inferences about causation or directionality. We observed that, overall, parental competitive victimhood was associated with lower contact intentions among minority group children; however, the study design meant that the alternative direction of effects or a reciprocal process cannot be ruled out. Further work using longitudinal data is therefore needed to tease apart the direction of the associations identified in the current study. For example, previous work in Northern Ireland found that, across three waves of data collection, children's cross-community contact via shared education positively predicted parents' own cross-community contact (Bähr et al., 2020). Similar longitudinal research could help ascertain whether children's intergroup interactions also influence their parents' experiences overtime.

The reliance on convenience sampling due to the COVID-19 pandemic was a further limitation. Future research could adopt a stratified sampling approach to include children living in both areas of ethnic heterogeneity and homogeneity, where opportunities for intergroup contact are varied (e.g., O'Driscoll et al., 2018). Moreover, the achieved sample size restricted our ability to test other mechanisms that could possibly account for the association between parental competitive victimhood and child contact intentions. For example, the family's own experience of victimisation could have influenced both parental competitive victimhood and children's willingness to engage in contact with the conflict rival group. Further work also is needed to establish the actual content of parental victimhood narratives (e.g., physical, psychological, material, cultural dimensions of suffering) (Noor et al., 2012), and the means through which these narratives are conveyed to children who did not directly experience the conflict (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). A more rigorous experimental design could also be used to

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identify potential mediating mechanisms of the association between exposure to victimhood narratives and child contact intentions. Adapting a design from Voca et al. (2022), children and parents could be randomly assigned to different storybook conditions, such as inclusive victimhood (both groups suffered similarly), competitive victimhood (the ingroup suffered more), and control conditions (no storybook), and subsequently asked about their perceived victimisation and willingness to engage with the outgroup.

Finally, the sample size in Croatia limits the strength of conclusions that can be drawn. Whereas there was a significant interaction between parental competitive victimhood and group status in RNM, the within-site finding for Croatia suggests that minority group children may experience differing socialisation processes (e.g., extent to which war-related events are discussed within the home). However, we were underpowered to detect anything smaller than a medium interaction effect in Croatia, suggesting caution for over-interpreting this null within-site interaction. Visually, there are similar patterns in the slopes across the combined (Figure 2), Croatia-only (Figure 3a) and RNM-only models (Figure 3b); the majority group remains relatively flat in terms of their intergroup contact intentions, whereas intergroup contact intentions are generally lower and have a negative slope among minority group children. These patterns point to the potential salience of group status, and the different responses minority and majority groups have to intergroup contact in post-conflict settings. Nonetheless, further research – with greater statistical power – is needed to more fully understand the effect of group status and/or parental narratives on children's willingness to interact with outgroup peers.

4.4 | Implications for policy and practice

The current study focused on parent–child transmission of victimhood narratives within the microsystem of the home. Although we cannot infer causality from the design, the findings of this study highlight the importance of identifying other interpersonal influences on children's intergroup contact intentions across the social ecology (e.g., what narratives are present during early schooling experiences). In line with the DPM, future research should go beyond microsystem-level factors to identify institutional structures which could serve to further support positive intergroup relations. Given the divided nature of post-accord settings, educational initiatives could be one such policy instrument for promoting prosociality early in development (Taylor, 2020).

In addition to parents, the educational system serves as a major agent of socialisation because children spend a large proportion of their waking hours at school (Nasie et al., 2016; Toups et al., 2018). Schools can use various educational methods (e.g., curricular contents, textbooks) to communicate the society's dominant values, goals and narratives to the next generation (Nasie et al., 2016). Given the compulsory nature of the school, the education system thus acts as a powerful agent of social change with the potential to overcome ethnic tension in post-conflict settings (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Hughes et al., 2020). However, group divisions in RNM and Croatia are exhibited in the presence of divided education systems, which provide limited interethnic contact opportunities, contributing to further social division (Hughes et al., 2020). Thus, shared education, which facilitates contact across group lines, has been recognised as a potential means of reducing intergroup conflict and supporting reconciliation efforts in post-conflict settings (Hewstone & Hughes, 2015; Hughes & Loader, 2023; McGlynn et al., 2004; McKeown & Taylor, 2017). Whereas integrated education involves the education of both groups together within the same school, shared education retains existing school structures but provides opportunities for schools from different education systems to engage in collaborative learning partnerships (Hansson & Roulston, 2021; Milliken, 2021). Intergroup contact itself, rather than the actual ethos of shared education, has been linked with more favourable intergroup attitudes among participating students (McGlynn et al., 2004). For instance, a recent five-wave, longitudinal, quasi-experimental study conducted in Northern Ireland, observed that participation in shared education resulted in a medium, positive effect on the level of intergroup contact pupils had outside of the school setting and small positive effects on pupils' outgroup attitudes, trust and empathy (Reimer et al., 2022). Moreover, children's participation in shared education has revealed positive, bidirectional associations between child and parent contact quantity (Bähr et al., 2020). Related to competitive victimhood, shared education could have the potential to shift prevailing narratives and encourage parent's own intergroup contact intentions.

Notwithstanding these potential benefits, implementing a shared education strategy can prove particularly challenging within post-accord societies. Shared education initiatives are tasked with uniting groups from opposing sides of the conflict, whilst simultaneously ensuring that the minority groups' cultural heritage is protected and recognising parents' rights to choose their child's education (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007; Misoska & Loader, 2021). Moreover, while positive effects of intergroup contact have been consistently reported (Boin et al., 2021; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), the quality of contact also matters. In post-conflict settings, intergroup contact without the presence of Allport's (1954)'s optimal conditions (e.g., equal status within the contact situation, shared goals) could serve to further escalate intergroup hostilities (Bloodworth, 2020). As not all contact is positive, the design of shared education programmes should thus consider situations (e.g., unstructured, unsupervised contact) under which intergroup contact could potentially backfire and serve to reinforce group divisions (Harwood et al., 2013; Paolini et al., 2010).

Recognising these competing demands, one potential solution could be shared education initiatives which foster interethnic integration within pre-existing educational structures (Misoska & Loader, 2021). For example, the Interethnic Integration in Education Programme (IIEP) in RNM aimed to increase opportunities for interethnic engagement by facilitating collaborations between monolingual schools and also within multilingual school settings (Loader et al., 2018). Through this programme, Albanian and Macedonian children attending primary and post-primary schools interacted with each other through curricular and extracurricular activities within ethnically and linguistically mixed contexts. Qualitative evidence points to the positive impact of

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the IIEP for alleviating feelings of anxiety about intergroup contact and reducing social distance among participating pupils (Misoska & Loader, 2021).

5 | CONCLUSION

The signing of a peace agreement does not guarantee reconciliation; the dominant group narratives and the quality of intergroup contact often remain unchanged in settings of intergroup conflict (Karić & Mihić, 2020). Almost three decades since the end of the armed violence in former Yugoslavia, the socio-psychological factors present during the escalation of the conflict (e.g., dominant narratives, group divisions) still prevail (Petrović et al., 2019). Intergroup contact is a potential antecedent of children's support for peace (Kosic et al., 2012; Taylor, Tomašić Humer, et al., 2022); thus, uncovering the predictors of children's intergroup contact intentions at the microsystem level has implications for reconciliation processes in post-conflict, former Yugoslav societies.

The children in the current study were all born after the formal cessation of violence and signing of peace agreements. Yet, results indicate that environments in which the post-accord generation are socialised, and the narratives to which they are exposed, may be associated with their future intergroup contact intentions. Further, these findings suggest that children from minority groups may be particularly aware of their group status and more susceptible to parental narratives of victimhood. As a lack of intergroup contact may hinder children's potential for outgroup prosociality, Shared education initiatives could be a valuable means of breaking the cycle of conflict and promoting deeper reconciliation and peacebuilding.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct and received full ethical approval from Queen's University Belfast (EPS 20_190).

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The preregistration and full list of measures for the larger project can be found at https://osf.io/cnk37.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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