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Reaching across social divides *deliberately*: Theoretical, political, and practical implications of intergroup contact volition for intergroup relations

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Abstract

The benefits of positive intergroup contact for intergroup attitudes are well-established. Yet individual and group self-segregation practices demonstrate that opportunities for intergroup contact are not sufficient for contact uptake; and persistent institutionalized segregation reinforces and compounds this problem. Hence, we need to understand what drives people towards and away from intergroup contact and what consequences the capacity to deliberately engage or avoid contact has for individuals, groups, and communities. This paper formally introduces the concept of *intergroup contact volition*: our perceived personal control over intergroup contact engagement and avoidance. We demonstrate this concept's theoretical, political, and practical significance by highlighting its embeddedness in both old and recent literature. We document debates around volition in early intergroup contact research and note a prolonged neglect since. After discussing reasons for that neglect, we present a detailed analysis of the concept, outlining how the idea of volition itself is contested and political, as well as the ways it

intersects with broader societal power and status dynamics. We then outline pathways for future research, including investigations of when taking volition away (making contact mandated) might be helpful, intersections between psychological and human geography perspectives on volition, and connections between volition and system justification. We argue that contact volition is intimately and ultimately linked to issues of social change: support of, versus resistance to, policies promoting intergroup integration. As a result, an enhanced understanding of volition is critical to developing intergroup contact research and practice into outcomes that maximize social justice.

KEYWORDS
contact avoidance, contact seeking, group segregation, intergroup contact, prejudice, self-selection, social change, volition

1 | INTRODUCTION

Most Westernized countries are diverse and multicultural, and interaction between members of different groups—*intergroup contact*—is frequent. There are more contacts now between people of different ethnic groups, sexualities, religions, and (dis)ability levels than ever before (Poushter et al., 2019). Some of those contacts are voluntary and intentional, others occur accidentally, and some are obligatory (or mandated) due to roles or workplace demands.

Seventy years of social psychological research and comprehensive meta-analyses have confirmed Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis: positive intergroup contact is often beneficial for intergroup relations: Typically, contact reduces prejudice and increases social inclusion, social integration, and trust (Davies et al., 2011; Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Although negative contact is detrimental, contact of varied and even suboptimal quality produces cumulative social benefits and buffers detrimental effects (Paolini et al., 2014; Ramos et al., 2019). Emerging evidence suggests that intergroup interactions improve individuals' cognitive flexibility and general adaptability (Crisp & Turner, 2011; Hodson et al., 2018) and enhance society-level health and productivity (Bécares et al., 2009; Dovidio et al., 2017).

However, these well-evidenced merits of intergroup contact do not necessarily and automatically translate into spontaneous and sustained uptake of contact across group divides. In many supposedly integrated societies, segregation persists both in macro-level societal institutions (e.g., education, employment), and micro-level social spaces, leading to the "socio-spatial isolation" of individuals (Schnell & Yoav, 2001). The US, for instance, despite landmark progress in institutionalized desegregation—as through the Brown versus Board of Education case ruling racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional (Warren, 1954)—remains structurally segregated, even hypersegregated (i.e., segregated on multiple dimensions: Massey & Denton, 1998). As the significance of top down, legalized, state-imposed segregation recedes in most globalized and Westernized societies, and opportunities for contact increase, people's personal and collective choices about contact become increasingly salient (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Paolini et al., 2018). These "private preference schemes" (i.e., individuals' likes and dislikes for affiliation; Goldberg, 1993) are now critical for understanding the persistence (and potential adaptability) of segregation.

By implication, researchers championing intergroup contact as an easy and convenient method to promote social integration and social change are faced with some uncomfortable and challenging questions: Why do people choose to live, work, and play in relatively segregated spaces? Why do they choose to send their children to ethnically homogeneous schools and withdraw them if diversity increases? Why, even in mixed spaces that provide ample opportunities for interaction across group lines, do people avoid such contact and behave in ways that reassert group boundaries? Is voluntary, mandated, or accidental intergroup contact better in terms of contact's dynamics or psychological consequences?

To address these important and pressing questions, social scientists need to clarify the social psychological foundations and consequences of *intergroup contact volition*—one's perceived personal control over intergroup contact engagement and avoidance. Analyses of this concept are still in their infancy (Bagci et al., 2021; Harwood, 2021; Husnu & Paolini, 2019; Husnu et al., 2023; Neves, 2024; Paolini, Gibbs et al., 2024a). In this paper, we formally discuss this concept and critically analyze its place in both historical and emerging examinations of intergroup contact to clarify contact volition's political, theoretical, and practical significance. Along this journey, we identify conceptual precursors and discuss contact volition's intimate associations with group power, status inequalities, and the dynamics of individual and collective support for (or resistance to) integration and social change. We finally sketch directions for future research that places intergroup contact volition in sharp focus, including systematic analyses of contact volition's consequences and extensions to human geography, and system justification.

2 | DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY

Different types of contact do not have uniform effects. Allport (1954) knew this when he formalized the "optimal conditions" for intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intimate contact yields larger reductions in prejudice than more casual contact (Pettigrew, 1998). Positive contact is better than negative contact (Barlow et al., 2012; Schäfer et al., 2021), and direct comparisons of contact varying in intimacy (Fuochi et al., 2020; Graf et al., 2020) and valence (Paolini & McIntyre, 2019; Reimer et al., 2017) are now contributing to a more complex and nuanced understanding of intergroup contact's dynamics and effects.

Although theorists and practitioners have become more aware that the *kind of contact* matters, the literature still tends to treat intergroup contact that happens in naturalistic settings, institutionalized and organizational contexts, and the laboratory as conceptually equivalent. In fact, those settings vary systematically and meaningfully (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Paolini et al., 2016)—including, importantly, along contact volition. In laboratory and intervention settings, groups are typically brought together in structured interactions that minimize or erase individual choice around contact (see Paolini, Gibbs et al., 2024a's coding of procedural and design parameters along self-selection affordances/opportunities). Outside the laboratory, individuals sometimes make choices about engaging in contact that ultimately sustain or challenge segregation. In Figure 1, individuals' deliberate choices of contact engagement challenge structural and psychological forces keeping individuals and communities apart.

In this article, we break from the mindset that ignores volitional processes. Critically, we argue that environments often vary in the degree to which they allow intergroup contact volition to be exerted: they vary in how much individuals can actively and intentionally initiate, maintain, terminate, or avoid contact and, as a result, enable meaningful variations in intergroup contact volition.

Broadly, we distinguish *voluntary* and *involuntary* forms of contact engagement and avoidance and see this distinction best understood as a continuum. We characterize experiences as "voluntary" when someone experiences being actively and deliberatively in control of contact initiation, engagement, termination, or avoidance. An Anglo Australian, for instance, might elect to attend (or actively opt-out of) a neighborhood Muslim cultural event. If they attend, their contact experiences at the event are likely to be experienced as voluntary. On the other hand, experiences are "involuntary" when prescribed or prohibited by others, or otherwise out of the perceived control of

FIGURE 1 Mexican and American children play on seesaws across the Mexico-US wall—A poignant example of voluntary intergroup contact by ordinary people.

self. Involuntary contact may be "mandated" (the "most" involuntary) when it is controlled by people with local power or status. An Anglo Australian might be required, for instance, to attend cultural diversity training for work or be told *not* to spend time with people of a different sexuality by their Church leader. Alternatively, still involuntary (but less so, and not of the mandated kind), a person might feel pressured to meet their friend's outgroup romantic partner or to interrupt an informal exchange with an outgroup neighbor over their garden fence when called back in by a baby's crying.

Importantly, the distinguishing feature here is not simply whether the self or others initiate a specific interaction, but rather whether the self (vs. others) experience having broader control over whether intergroup contact occurs or not. Some diverse settings might create the conditions for contact engagement but allow avoidance (e.g., ethnically diverse schools). In such settings, actively engaging with an outgroup member is likely to be experienced as voluntary if one has voluntarily entered the setting. This also implies that an Anglo Australian child who had no choice over whether to attend a diverse school, for instance, could still experience a self-initiated intergroup interaction as somewhat involuntary, if the context of their limited school options is salient.

By distinguishing different internal and external sources of control, our approach acknowledges the socially distributed nature of contact volition and hence the co-existence of multiple sources of volition (e.g., self and others) that might interact in complex and dynamic ways. As we discuss later, allowing for multiple sources of contact volition clarifies that people have unequal control and autonomy around intergroup contact (Harwood, 2021). Hence, contact volition is inevitably tied to discussions of power, wealth, and class.

We theorize contact volition as distinct and conceptually orthogonal to contact engagement/avoidance. This orthogonality is displayed graphically in Figure 2. Here, the horizontal dimension captures psychological and environmental determinants of volition—an individual's perception that they have *control* (or not) over their contact experience. The vertical dimension captures psychological and environmental factors that favor contact engagement (contact happening) versus avoidance (contact not happening). Thus, our "contact volition space" incorporates (along the top) a continuum from mandated to voluntary engagement, and (on the bottom) a continuum from mandated to voluntary avoidance.

In our conceptualization of contact volition, "accidental" contact sits somewhere away from the perceived control of the self or others (see center of Figure 2) and for this reason it might be less frequent in institutional and

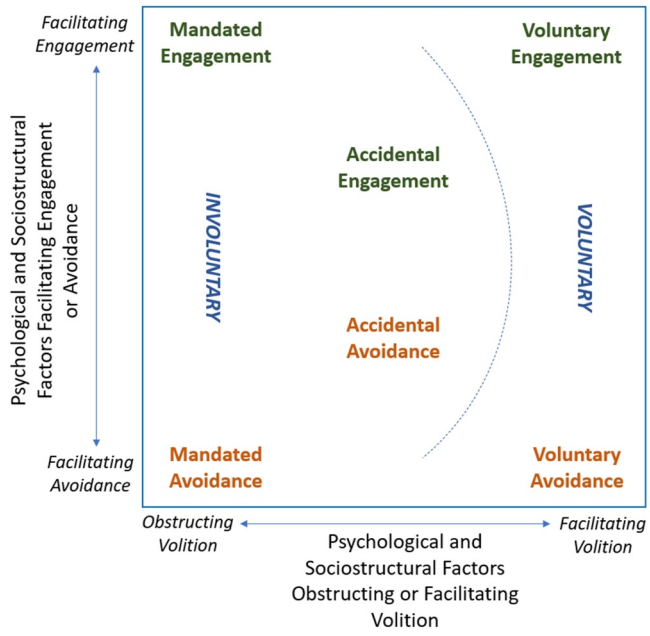

FIGURE 2 Ecologies of intergroup contact volition or the "contact volition space."

organizational settings where there are typically clear stipulations about who has control over the social context. Accidental contact is experienced by the self as just happening (or failing to happen) outside of any person's expressed or experienced agency. For instance, a White American might sign up for a local football team, only to discover that ethnic refugee players are in the team, and they need to interact with them (accidental engagement). Or they might take a trip by car and hence miss out on fleeting interethnic encounters on the train (accidental avoidance).

By considering accidental contact, our model explicitly considers the degree to which category distinctions are incidental or integral in these contact decisions (Bodenhausen, 1993; Brown & Hewstone, 2005). In voluntary and involuntary forms of contact engagement/avoidance (the corners of Figure 2), foreknowledge of, and attending to group differences is intrinsic and central to contact uptake (or vetoing). In contrast, for accidental forms, category salience is subjectively irrelevant or unattended and foreknowledge is absent, at least in the initial choice to engage or avoid. Of course, the subjective sense of volition associated with any specific interaction is likely to change over time, along with the relevance and salience of group memberships. For example, interactions that turn conflictual might become subjectively less voluntary; in a similar vein, mandated contact might be experienced as progressively more voluntary if it is consistently enjoyable (see Denrell, 2005).

We prefer this typology of contact volition to simpler definitions. Bagci et al. (2021) recently distinguished "voluntary" from "contingent" contact: respectively, contact that is "intentional and pursued by the active choice of the self" (p. 269) versus contact "primarily based on external/situational conditions" (p. 269). Our classification not only discriminates between non-equivalent types of contingent or exogenous contact (e.g., accidental vs. mandated), it also recognizes that internal control and active choice by the self is not only implicated in contact initiation and engagement; it is also a key determinant for contact *not* happening, as in the case of active opting out and contact avoidance.

The variations outlined in Figure 2 should also be consequential for contact's effects. Fresh meta-analytic evidence (Paolini, Gibbs et al., 2024a) indicates that environments varying in opportunities or affordances for self-selection in and out of intergroup contact significantly vary in the size of valenced contact effects: The link

between negative contact and prejudice is significantly larger than the link between positive contact and prejudice reduction in contexts where it is easier to opt-out of contact (if one wishes to), than in contexts where opting-out of contact is restricted. We expect these environmental effects to reflect variations in individual contact volition. Similarly, we expect variance in individual contact volition to systematically affect contact dynamics (see e.g., contact valence and intimacy in Bagci et al., 2021), as well as broader downstream consequences of intergroup contact for individuals, groups, and communities. We return to these ideas in the Future Research section; next, we demonstrate that contact volition has already shaped important discussions throughout the history of intergroup contact research even if we have not necessarily recognized it.

3 | CONTACT VOLITION IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Speculations about the nature and consequences of voluntary and involuntary contact were present in early contact research (Allport, 1954; Clark, 1953), but were swiftly buried amid complex theoretical and methodological sensitivities. Here, we retrace the factors that explain the prolonged neglect and that have contributed to make contact volition a highly contested concept.

3.1 | Early interests

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary contact underpinned—in both explicit and subtle ways—early debates about the implementation of school desegregation in the US, especially during the period leading up to the formal development of the contact hypothesis during the 1940s and 1950s (Durrheim & Dixon, 2018). On one side of this debate were protagonists who favored a gradualist approach, arguing that social change should unfold slowly, cautiously, and with due awareness of existing racial prejudices and resistance to interracial mixing (e.g., Ashmore, 1954). These scholars favored desegregation that aligned with the attitudes and wants of the people and warned that any sudden, *forced* implementation of desegregation *against the will* of the White majority would likely result in racial conflict and thus prove self-defeating in the longer term. On the other side of this debate, protagonists favored swift, bold interventions to ensure the rapid desegregation of the education system (e.g., Clark, 1953). This other camp argued that negative intergroup attitudes and resistance to desegregation would subside, providing such interventions were unequivocally sanctioned by government and school authorities.

Early evidence (e.g., Allport, 1954; Clark, 1953, 1954) overwhelmingly supported the latter, bold intervention approach, and the benefits of *mandated* contact. Their data indicated that interracial contact generally increased rather than decreased participants' acceptance of desegregation in domains such as housing (Jahoda & West, 1951) and the military (Kenworthy, 1951). The threat of racial conflict declined as participants' behaviors gradually aligned with a new social (external) order. Moreover, positive interactions with others encouraged a virtuous cycle in which participants became ever more willing to tolerate, if not actively seek out, similar contact experiences in the future, even if intergroup conflict sometimes arose in the early phases of desegregation (Clark, 1954).

A poignant example is provided by research on the creation of racially mixed platoons during World War II. These platoons were mandated by US military leadership due to wartime expediency. Yet they posed an operational risk: *Forcing* Black and White soldiers to fight alongside one another could easily backfire into racial tensions, infighting, poor morale, and military ineffectiveness. As it turned out, serving together in combat generally had the opposite effect. Star et al. (1949/1958), for example, found that white infantrymen serving in mixed race platoons quickly became more tolerant of racial integration, with initial resentment rapidly giving way to positive acceptance. As one Platoon Sergeant from South Carolina explained:

> When I heard about it, I said that I'd be damned if I'd wear the same shoulder patch they did. After the first day when we saw how they fought, I changed my mind. They're just like any of the other boys to us (Star et al., 1949, p. 598).

Hence, early debates around intergroup contact volition were politically loaded, and desirable societal outcomes did stem from initially unpalatable mandated contact experiences.

3.2 | Methodological and conceptual roadblocks

After these initial forays, subsequent contact research has largely overlooked contact volition. There are clear methodological reasons for such neglect. While investigations of the original contact hypothesis focused on institutional desegregation's effects on intergroup relations, they quickly narrowed to concentrate on assessing the correlations between highly structured, positive contact and prejudice. The emphasis on highlighting and underscoring the (positive) consequences of intergroup contact (vs. opposition to desegregation: Paolini et al., 2021) shifted the focus to *contact affecting prejudice* (at the expense of investigating prejudice influencing the uptake and acceptability of contact). Hence, for many contact scholars, *selective* or *self-selected* contact engagement/avoidance (contact volition) became a conceptual and analytical artefact. This methodological confound required control by design or statistics (Binder et al., 2009; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Wilson, 1996) to achieve "unpolluted" internally valid causal inferences about contact's effects.

The move away from examining self-selection processes around contact was further cemented by widespread concerns about the "spectrum" of introspection and mentalistic processes, of which volition seemed to be a good representative and a particularly intractable case (Brass et al., 2013). If people lack awareness of their own goals and intentions, then studying volition is a non-starter.

Methodological inertia also played a role in stifling progress. Traditionally, contact researchers have either focused on contact that is enforced through social intervention (e.g., Lemmer & Wagner, 2015) or experimentation (e.g., Page-Gould et al., 2008) *or* investigated real-world contact (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) with varied (and unmeasured) opportunities for contact volition. The distinctive qualities of these research paradigms led to somewhat siloed research paradigms (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Paolini, Harris, et al., 2016), and impeded attempts to examine volition *across those paradigms*. A similar point could be made about research on the microecology of segregation (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2019). Observational research in this paradigm shows that, in contexts where segregation is institutionally permissible or even actively encouraged, high levels of segregation persist. Yet, this insight has not resulted in widespread questioning of desegregation's positive effects or contact's prejudice-reducing outcomes.

Curiously, even when opportunities for cross-paradigm comparisons arose, contact researchers failed to appreciate their full conceptual and practical significance. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), for instance, checked for self-selection effects in ancillary analyses of their influential meta-analysis (p. 758). They found that procedural features associated with participants' *ability to actively opt in* to contact moderated the contact-prejudice relationship: Studies allowing no contact choice (e.g., fully randomized experiments) returned larger reductions in prejudice than studies allowing some choice (e.g., quasi-experiments) or full choice (e.g., cross-sectional surveys and field studies). These results are rather compelling in demonstrating that contact volition shapes and helps explain contact dynamics and consequences. Yet, perhaps because of the standard treatment of contact volition as a confound, this issue was not pursued further.

4 | DEVELOPING A FOCUS ON VOLITION

Despite such faltering beginnings, attention to volition and related concepts is growing among contact researchers. In this section, we identify some key precursors and predictors of volition and discuss political factors that impinge on how volition is understood. We then discuss the role of social inequality in shaping individual experiences of volition.

4.1 | Links to precursors of volition and their antecedents

As contact scholars gain a better understanding of the complexities of intergroup contact dynamics (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Paolini et al., 2014, 2016), they are becoming increasingly accepting of the notion that contact-prejudice associations are bi-directional: (a) intergroup contact has positive effects on prejudice and (b) prejudice drives *self-selection* into (or away from) contact (Binder et al., 2009; Brown & Pehrson, 2019). From this more complex, bidirectional perspective, contact volition is not merely a methodological problem or artefact (a *bias*), but rather a critical factor, or set of processes, deserving full theoretical and empirical attention (Paolini et al., 2022).

Reflecting this changing intellectual climate, researchers are turning their attention to factors driving intergroup contact seeking or avoidance and predicting intergroup contact (Kauff et al., 2021; Paolini et al., 2022; Ron et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2020). These emerging analyses reveal individual- and group-based conceptual precursors of contact volition, including "confidence in contact," "contact readiness" (Turner & Cameron, 2016), and "willingness to engage in contact" (Paolini et al., 2018).

For example, *confidence in contact* reflects a state of individual readiness for positive contact that is characterized by relatively high trust and skill for undertaking successful contact encounters as well as positive beliefs and experiences about these encounters (Turner & Cameron, 2016). This set of abilities and beliefs would make people "contact ready" (Turner & Cameron, 2016) and fuel their intentions to seek out, rather than avoid, contact (i.e., be willing to engage in contact; Paolini et al., 2018). Conversely, willingness to engage should be predictably diminished by well-known "enemies" of intergroup contact, including intergroup anxiety and contact uncertainty, realistic and symbolic threat, past experiences of negative contact, and negative meta stereotypes (Paolini et al., 2018, 2022 for overviews).

There should be intimate links between these precursor concepts, their antecedents and contact volition. For example, we expect individual confidence in contact to explain significant variance in individuals' willingness to engage/avoid contact and (behavioral) readiness for contact. These influences should in turn impact contact volition and ultimately determine whether contact occurs or not. Also, as the psychological precursors of contact volition reflect a mix of situational and personal factors (e.g., pro-diversity climate, peer norms vs. self-expansion motivation; Paolini et al., 2022; Turner & Cameron, 2016), we also expect contact volition to mirror this complex net of antecedents.

Indeed, many concepts may have parallel existence at both the personal and contextual levels. For example, expanding on this attention to context, confidence in contact has been recently elevated to a collective-level factor. In their investigation on residential de-segregation in Northern Ireland, Stevenson et al. (2021) conceptualize *collective* confidence in contact as a group's shared belief of being able to engage in positive contact with the outgroup. This collective extension is noteworthy because it reminds us that, in many contexts, contact is both a "shared experience" and a "collective achievement" (Kauff et al., 2021). By extension, we argue that contact volition, like its conceptual precursors, needs situating within its broader (and often contested) socio-historic and political contexts.

4.2 | Contact volition as contested and political

The "racial order," or hierarchy of groups in society, is always shifting, and hence the meaning of choosing to live with and interact with others is never static. As collective and historical representations, *discourse around* contact volition provides insights on avenues and obstacles to social integration interventions. The socially constructed and contested nature of contact choice and volition is evident in both past and contemporary debates.

For example, modern White America now endorses the ideals of contact and desegregation but continues to resist their practical realization (Dixon et al., 2007). For example, the principle of desegregated education—and thus increased opportunity for interracial contact in educational contexts—is overwhelmingly supported among White Americans (Bobo et al., 2012; Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971). But policies designed to implement this principle (e.g., via quotas or bussing) are resisted: they supposedly violate principles of meritocracy, infringe on individuals' or states' rights, are too expensive, or are unnecessary as racial inequality is no longer a problem (Dixon et al., 2017).

Similarly, White resistance to sharing public amenities (e.g., beaches and leisure facilities) with Black South Africans during the fall of apartheid drew on historical representations that constructed segregation and contact avoidance as a natural tendency that places limits on the nature and pace of social integration and change (Durrheim & Dixon, 2005). By invoking natural tendencies, avoidance of racial contact is framed as an inevitable, if regrettable, response to ill-judged policies of forced integration, thus legitimizing White flight from newly desegregated spaces.

Along similar lines, recent explanations for the persistence of residential segregation in American cities have become intertwined with ideological constructions of the meaning of choice. Residential segregation is driven by residents' private decisions about where to live, but underlying these choices might be "banal" ethnocentrism and benign ingroup preferences (e.g. Clark, 1991) or an outright expression of outgroup prejudice, stereotyping, and rejection (Zubrinksy & Bobo, 1996).

Contact volition, in short, lies at the center of a political minefield, and interventions to promote social integration and change therefore require careful political and historical contextualization. They also require a clear-eyed understanding of how long-standing social inequalities in wealth and power translate to inequalities in volition.

4.3 | Power, social inequality, and asymmetries in contact volition

There is remarkably little research on intergroup contact between different social classes (but see Vargas Salfate & Stern, 2023; Vázquez et al., 2022) and, to our knowledge, no work to-date has explicated the associations between social class and contact volition. These associations are likely to be complex due to the implications and competing influences of multiple social class correlates, such as group size, group status, power, and culture.

Based on mere differences in group size, it is a statistical principle that members of minority groups are more likely to encounter members of majority groups than vice versa (Barlow et al., 2013; Crystal et al., 2008; Vezzali et al., 2023). Hence, members of minority groups are likely to have developed greater ability to operate competently during intergroup encounters—they will have acquired greater contact self-efficacy (Mazziotta et al., 2011) and social adaptability (Wallace & McIntyre, 2021). Consequently, people from lower classes may feel more capable of managing their contact experiences and more equipped to engage in intergroup contact than middle-class people.

These influences of group size are likely confounded by the influence of group status and power. People from higher social class backgrounds have more resources (e.g., finances) that allow them to choose whether to engage in intergroup encounters. Greater social autonomy (Wallace & McIntyre, 2021) increases their control over both voluntary engagement and *avoidance* (Denrell, 2005). Class and contact may thus have a negative association because higher class people's greater social autonomy allows contact avoidance. This in turn inhibits the

development of the skills that are necessary to successfully manage intergroup encounters, resulting in lower social adaptability, reduced motivation for contact, and hence further cocooning majority members from genuine contact experiences (Wallace & McIntyre, 2021).

Social class also covaries with the subjective value of autonomy and control (Stephens et al., 2007) and probably with perceived contact importance (Van Dick et al., 2004). Higher class people might perceive fewer potential rewards from interaction with lower class people than vice versa. Moreover, the middle-class appear to possess a cultural model of agency that values choice to a greater extent than the lower-class (Bowman et al., 2009; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). Hence, middle-class people may have more voluntary contact engagement/avoidance as a means of expressing their culturally valued sense of choice. They may also react more negatively to mandated contact than lower class people because mandated contact contravenes their choice-based model of agency.

Underlying in the discussion above are assumptions about the other side of the coin: involuntary contact. Lower class people, for instance, develop social adaptability not necessarily by willingly engaging with outgroup members, but through the necessity of such engagement imposed by relative numbers and roles. They encounter many situations in which accomplishing basic daily tasks involves interacting with the socioeconomic outgroup. On the other hand, many members of majority groups (e.g., middle class people) will find it relatively easy to accomplish their core daily activities without recourse to meeting outgroup members, or will do so only in situations in which they are in control and where the interaction involves well-scripted role relations.

In such contexts of volition asymmetry, the dynamics of individual, micro-level, contact probably reflect the broader societal power dynamics. The tourist industry puts these dynamics in sharp relief, as people with the financial resources to travel for leisure often end up interacting primarily with lower class "locals" working low-level service jobs (e.g., restaurant staff, tour staff, drivers, receptionists, etc.) who are often minority cultural group members even within the local context. It barely needs saying that such asymmetrically volitional encounters likely reinforce the existing status differences. Much of this contact carries high levels of group salience as a function of the setting (e.g., ethnic restaurants), dynamics that set the stage for solidifying perceptions of (low status) outgroups.

In summary, the association between majority/minority status (including social class) and contact volition is likely to be complex and may depend on which of several associated factors are most influential in any given situation. However, as with many other aspects of life, it is almost assured that people with more wealth and power will both perceive, and have, more contact volition; this will have consequences for the quality and quantity of contact that they experience, and thus the effects of that contact.

5 | AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

So far, we have extended on formative analyses of contact volition (Bagci et al., 2021; Husnu & Paolini, 2019; Paolini et al., 2024), delineated theoretically the concept, and offered a critical analysis based on both historical and emerging investigations of intergroup contact. We identified contact volition in the early history of intergroup contact research and noted a prolonged neglect since that time, which we explained in terms of ingrained methodological concerns and research siloes. We then expanded on contact volition's prickly political essence and showed how it interacts with established and emerging sociopolitical power and inequality. We explicated important, novel links between contact volition, group dynamics and inequalities around power, status, and wealth.

Now, we call for social scientists to start unveiling the social psychological foundations and consequences of intergroup contact volition more broadly so to understand how, when, and why people's volitional orientations are more influential and amenable to change. Below we sketch directions for future research we see most promising: We first discuss whether volition is "unconditional good" and develop the idea that mandated contact sometimes might be necessary. We then discuss how human geography and urban design can help shaping volitional practices and finally make novel connections between system justification, ironic contact effects and contact volition.

5.1 | Is volitional control that good?

The consequences of human volition are positively framed in most contemporary psychology. For example, cognitive neuroscience shows that neural reward systems are more strongly activated by pairing rewards with self-directed, rather than other-directed, choices (Tanaka et al., 2008; Tricomi et al., 2004). Conversely, high levels of stress compromise one's sense of autonomy, partly by reducing cognitive accessibility of one's preferences and self-referential representations ("self-access"; Kuhl et al., 2015), and increasing awareness of others' expectations or threats (Tops et al., 2016). In clinical research, confusions between sources of one's goals/tasks (self vs. other) have been found to be associated with reduced emotional self-awareness and increased rumination (Diefendorff et al., 2000; Sheldon, 2014). The picture emerging from these literature is unconditionally optimistic in portraying individual's volition as objectively good for the individual and lack of volition (or other people's volition) as objectively bad.

By extension, the ability to exert (contact) volition should also be experienced as subjectively good for those who have it and subjectively bad for those who do not (see Bagci et al., 2021; Harell et al., 2017; Husnu & Paolini, 2019, for initial evidence). The feeling of being in control over one's behavior (or "sense of agency") is a fundamental biological need (Leotti et al., 2010) and adaptive for survival, as scarcity in one's sense of agency would significantly reduce any motivation to actively engage with the physical and social environment (see e.g., the notion of "learnt helplessness"; Abramson et al., 1978). Consequently, the effort we expend to regulate our behavior depends heavily on the belief that we have agency; the mere exertion of choice and even possibility of choice is therefore rewarding (Shapiro et al., 1996).

Yet, in this article we urge a more circumspect stance when considering volition's impact in intergroup and political psychology. In fact, preliminary social psychological evidence suggests that contact volition is not unconditionally beneficial for troubled group relations (see Husnu et al., 2023 for data on volition and category salience). As noted earlier, environmental opportunities for contact volition might even backfire and increase the chances of a pernicious spiraling of intergroup dynamics following contact (Paolini, Gibbs et al., 2024a). In a comprehensive meta-analysis of valenced contact research, for example, we found that negativity biases in intergroup contact effects (or negative valence asymmetries whereby negative contact is more influential than positive contact; Barlow et al., 2012) were larger under conditions that allowed individuals to freely opt-in and -out of contact than under conditions that restricted those choices. As made clear in our earlier model, volition also implies volition to *avoid* contact. Allowing people the freedom to associate with whom they wish is a fundamental tenet of many Western cultures, yet such individual freedom also facilitates narrow and homogeneous social circles and suppresses the potential benefits of intergroup contact. The same meta-analysis found that motivation to avoid contact also is associated with exacerbated negativity biases in contact effects. Hence, individual freedom to choose around contact, if not detrimental, might be riskier than involuntary contact for trajectories of broad intergroup dynamics over time.

From a societal stance, we see contact volition as a fundamentally political concept, embedded in dynamics of power and wealth inequality and subject to cultural and class influences. Indeed, while liberal ideologies surrounding intergroup relations are normative in many places, literal walls separating groups still exist (e.g., Israel, Southern United States, Northern Ireland) and sustain inequality and separation. Similarly, legal restrictions that shape contact volition exist in many societies (e.g., restrictions on women's movements and use of public facilities, highly gendered religious practices). These forces shape the subjective value of individual and collective autonomy. Hence, contact volition needs to be understood in its historical and ideological milieu as intimately and ultimately linked to issues of social change and support for (vs. resistance to) policies promoting/discouraging intergroup contact and integration.

It is worth noting that this apparent disjoint and emerging tension between individual and group perspectives on contact volition was indeed the same one fueling early debates (see our early section on the history of the contact hypothesis). Back then, the disagreement was on the precedence of folkways' attitudes and wants versus

"stateways" solutions to segregation. The notion of the need for (individual) readiness for contact was arguably part of the "gradualist" resistance to desegregation following the Brown decision. The assumption that individual attitudes and wants must change before desegregation could unfold was precisely what Clarke and colleagues questioned, citing studies of the military and housing. This other camp argued that "stateways would (ultimately) change folkways," and attitudes follow institutionally enforced desegregation.

We think it is time for this dialectic tension between individual volition and broader societal order to be brought back to the fore in contemporary analyses and debates (see also Paolini, Graf et al., 2024). What is experienced at the individual level as mildly uncomfortable because (initially) non-volitional, might indeed turn out to be a desirable entry point for new and productive (and eventually voluntary) interactions across group divides (Denrell, 2005) that ultimately shape intergroup attitudes and community-level processes for the better and for the benefit of individuals *and* collectives. Seminal research on intergroup contact in prison, for instance (Hodson, 2008), shows that conditions of very limited choice facilitate contact's prejudice-reduction effects. This occurs particularly for people who are less tolerant to start with and thus less likely to seek out contact voluntarily to start with. Investigations onto the longitudinal interplay between contact volition, contact valence and their short- and long-term consequences on attitudes and behaviors should be able to unveil the pathways that transform mandated contact into contact that is voluntary and, eventually, routinized or even desired.

The social engineering aspects of these proposals are uncomfortable, but so are the mostly choice-driven aspects of spontaneous human behavior that perpetuate deleterious forms of segregation, and (even more so) the top-down institutionalized segregation which persists in many societies. While it is too simplistic to ask whether voluntary or involuntary contact is "better," considerable research now suggests that waiting for spontaneous, voluntary contact alone to bridge intergroup divides is overly optimistic (perhaps even naïve). Work on micro-ecologies of segregation and macro-ecologies of residential and educational choices and resistance to integration, for instance, all suggest that voluntary contact might be the exception rather than the rule. Thus, we see a significant role for forms of institutionally mandated (i.e., involuntary) contact in catalyzing more pro-volitional mindsets and social change.

5.2 | Contact volition's peoples and places: Social psychology meets human geography

Naturalistic intergroup settings vary significantly and meaningfully in the extent to which they permit or limit contact volition and contact engagement. However, we know little about how contextual-geographical-ecological factors influence contact and contact volition or how those factors interact with psychological processes (like personality and ideology) to shape contact's outcomes.

People's choices about contact often occur in spatial conditions not of their own choosing. Systems of urban segregation shape physical and functional proximity and hence contact processes. Simple variations in the layout and architecture of housing projects influence both the frequency and desirability of contact (Jahoda & West, 1951; Wilner et al., 1952). Work in Belfast and South Africa suggests that spatial proximity can sometimes increase residents' willingness to avoid contact, intensifying their desire to maintain material barriers between groups (Dixon et al., 2020a, 2020b; Dixon et al., 2023). In contexts where the organization of human geography signifies sharp boundaries between groups, contact avoidance reflects a fear of entering proximal others' *spaces* - or having "them" enter "our" spaces - as much as an unwillingness to encounter *others* (e.g., Dixon et al., 2022; Neves, 2024).

Thus, conceptually, contact volition is linked to processes such as place identity, belonging, place-related feelings of threat, and alienation. People may be willing to meet on "shared" ground but not in "outgroup territory." This points to the value of integrating social psychological work on contact volition with work in companion disciplines such as human geography and environmental psychology. It also suggests that attempts to facilitate cross-community interactions or understand the volitional dimension of contact need to address relationships between people and place as well as between people and other people.

From these premises, it is easier to identify structural predictors of contact volition. Contextual diversity (objective and subjective), for instance, should make it easy to deliberately engage in, and hard to deliberately avoid contact. Hence, it should expand the "space," or opportunities, for voluntary contact engagement (the area around Figure 2's top right-hand corner) and constrain the space for voluntary contact avoidance (Figure 2's bottom right corner). The opposite should be true for contextual homogeneity.

Socio-psychologically, tolerant societal norms, attitudes, and ideologies all expand environmental opportunities for voluntary contact and constrain opportunities for voluntary avoidance (with the opposite again true for intolerant norms, attitudes, and ideologies). And such socio-psychological factors, of course, interact with structural-geographical factors, as intolerant norms and intergroup anxiety drive segregation, for instance. Research on precursor concepts of contact volition, like confidence and willingness to engage/avoid contact (Paolini et al., 2022), as well as emerging work on predictors of intergroup contact (Kauff et al., 2021), suggest a range of other key structural and psychological factors that contribute to shape these ecologies of contact volition, including: peaceful (vs. conflictual) relationships; intimacy (vs. formality) of places; intergroup anxiety, etc. These associations demand empirical corroboration and a unified, integrated framework. Some of our upcoming work attempts such integration.

To address this clear gap in knowledge of places and people that display systematically high and low levels of contact volition, we envisage an interdisciplinary approach that bridges human geography and social psychology to capitalize on their respective disciplinary strengths. Geographic research on segregation has traditionally focused on the macro-level organization of housing, education, and employment to provide detailed topographies of segregated and integrated places (e.g., Massey & Denton, 1993). These topographies can be significantly enhanced with investigations of their psychological corollaries (e.g., Dixon et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2023). Likewise, due to a traditional emphasis on general, context-invariant processes, social psychological analyses of diversity and contact are largely insensitive to geographic contexts and structural parameters. Future research on volition should therefore combine the best of these two disciplinary worlds. Such an integration might also permit interesting connections to research on online contact, by treating the online world as another "place" with its own unique contact/volition-related affordances (Harwood, 2021).

5.3 | Contact volition in system justifications and ironic effects

System justification occurs when group members defend or bolster the social systems and status hierarchies within which their groups exist. Members of advantaged groups have clear, self- and identity-based reasons to justify social systems that underscore their privileges. What is more interesting and debated (e.g., Jost et al., 2023; Rubin et al., 2023a, Rubin et al., 2023b) is the system justification found among members of disadvantaged groups. For example, why do women support organizational systems that entail a gender pay gap, and why do African Americans support political parties whose policies implicitly support racism?

It is possible that contact volition plays an important role here. As discussed earlier, contact volition is affected by system-level factors, such as societal history, economics, norms, and ideologies as well as asymmetries in group power and size. A social reality imbued with political and historical pressures of low contact choice (i.e., high physical segregation and low contact volition) might reinforce status hierarchies and lead people to acknowledge and "justify" status hierarchies as "the way things are" (e.g., "We can't reach out to them because that's the way things are"). Hence, structural segregation and low contact volition might positively predict system justification.

Connecting back to the previous section, factors in the "built" environment might reinforce these system-reifying beliefs: It is perhaps easier to envision a change in interpersonal relations between people than to imagine a massive shift in "who lives where." These system-level factors might reduce disadvantaged minority group members' choices in engaging in contact with members of advantaged majority groups more than vice versa

(Harwood, 2021); minority groups might therefore have developed a greater ability to manage successful outcomes from their contact experiences (Wallace & McIntyre, 2021). These more plentiful and successful mandated contact experiences may contribute to reduce prejudice felt by disadvantaged groups towards advantaged outgroups and, consequently, increase their system justification and reduce their motive for social change (Saguy et al., 2009). Hence, differences in contact volition between advantaged and disadvantaged groups may help to explain disadvantaged groups' justification of their disadvantaged position or, at least, their lack of motivation to attempt to change it.

Here, the system justification perspective overlaps with research demonstrating ironic effects of intergroup contact among minority group members. For instance, positive contact with majority groups tends to suppress activism for social justice among people who could potentially benefit from such activism (Saguy et al., 2009). Future research should explore whether differing experiences of segregation and contact volition among marginalized group members predict their endorsement of system-justifying beliefs and their activism (or lack thereof) for change.

6 | CONCLUSION

People's control over whether they are able and willing to engage (or avoid engaging) with outgroup members varies due to their long-term socialization and psychological characteristics, as well as by the dynamic physical and social environments in which they are immersed. While levels of volition are probably somewhat stable within individuals, they are malleable, and indeed can probably change on a moment-to-moment basis depending on immediate social cues and opportunities. The causes and consequences of contact volition represent a rich and novel arena for intergroup researchers interested in understanding how to unleash the full potential of intergroup contact towards a more equitable and just world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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