"Mad Scared" versus "I Was Sad": Emotional expression and response in urban adolescent males

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A B S T R A C T

Decades of masculinity research have concluded that society places higher demands on males to adhere to norms for low emotional expression; yet, countless studies find that emotional expression is integral to well-being. Unfortunately, this contradiction places boys and men in a tenuous position as they must navigate a bombardment of societal messages about the importance of emotional stoicism and invincibility. For urban adolescents, the situation is more complicated as they encounter environmental stressors that place greater emphasis on projecting a tough façade. Thus, our primary aim was to assess to what degree dyads of close adolescent male friends from urban, low-income neighborhoods are able to engage in emotional expression and response and to explore some of the underlying mechanisms and interpersonal processes. Qualitative findings from our sample suggest that urban boys exhibit a wide range of behaviors when participating in dyadic emotional disclosure and response, including being highly emotionally expressive and supportive in the context of close male friendship.

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Decades of masculinity research have concluded that society places higher demands on males than females to adhere to norms for low emotional expression (e.g., Levant, Graef, Smalley, Williams, & McMillan, 2008), emotional control (e.g., Addis, 2011), and *restrictive emotionality* (Snell, 1989). From an early age and throughout the lifespan, boys and men receive a barrage of messages about *hegemonic masculinity,* idealized and unattainable standards for masculine behavior (e.g., Connell, 2000), including those related to emotional expression (e.g., Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Levant et al., 2008; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Way, 2011). These gendering processes and messages often communicate that engaging in appropriate forms of masculinity means avoiding behaviors perceived as "feminine" and "gay," such as displaying "excessive" or soft emotions (e.g., Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Froyum, 2007; Kimmel, 1994; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Not surprisingly, research correspondingly indicates behavioral differences between boys' and girls' emotional expression (for reviews: Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Courtenay, 2000; Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Masculine gender socialization processes that favor emotional restriction over emotional expression influence boys and men in countless ways (e.g., Addis, 2011; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999). For instance, while baby boys appear more expressive and cry more frequently during early infancy (e.g., Weinberg, Tronick, Cohn, & Olson, 1999), these trends begin to disappear

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with the emergence of masculine gender socialization (e.g., Bem, 1981; Chu, 2014; Way, 2011). Furthermore, while findings indicate that young boys can be emotionally expressive and vulnerable with their friends, they can start to transition away from softer emotions during middle adolescence and become less expressive (e.g., Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kilmartin, Forssmann-Falck, & Kliewer, 1998; Way, 2011). Boys and men have also been found to more frequently utilize harder emotions and externalizing behaviors, such as anger, aggression, and substance abuse, when expressing vulnerable feelings (for review: Courtenay, 2000). Research indicates that they can struggle to communicate about and decipher emotions, including experiencing themselves as emotionally silent and invisible in their personal relationships (Addis, 2011). Levant (2001) suggests the presence of a male-specific form of alexithymia, i.e., deficits in men's ability to identify and describe emotions. In addition to findings that girls disclose more frequently to their friends, boys have reported the outcome expectations that emotional disclosure will be a "waste of time" and/or will make them feel "weird" (Rose et al., 2012).

Theoretical and empirical work suggest that males living in urban environments, with higher rates of violence and aggression and low socio-economic status, may experience even more pressure to develop a strong façade and conceal emotional vulnerability than their non-urban counterparts (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1993; Truman & Langton, 2014). Previous research also suggests that when boys and men's dominance or physical control is threatened, or when they are exposed to violent neighborhoods or race-related stress, they engage in a compensatory response including increased adherence to masculine norms (e.g., Babl, 1979; Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Froyum, 2007; Majors & Billson, 1993). Milgram described the necessity of responding to urban "overload" by "assuming an unfriendly countenance," which both "protects and estranges" the individual from social contact (1970, p. 1462). Similarly, more extreme forms of emotional stoicism in certain African American male populations have been referred to as a *cool pose* meant to convey invulnerability to a threatening world (Majors & Billson, 1993). Findings indicate that males living in urban environments may be significantly less emotionally expressive and less likely to express a need for help compared to their rural counterparts (e.g., Farmer, Clark, & Sherman, 2003). This suggests that the urban environment may contribute to lower emotional expressivity.

In sum, limited research findings indicate that masculine norms for low emotional expressivity in adolescent males have the potential to be amplified by the stressors inherent in low-income, urban environments. Theories speculate that individuals living in this context can use emotional withdrawal as a strategy to protect themselves from overstimulation and/or stressors that can be interpreted as threatening to one's safety or well-being, but that this withdrawal can also estrange them from others (e.g., Addis, 2011; Milgram, 1970; Way, 2011). In consideration that increased emotional expression is generally adaptive in promoting physical, emotional, and relational well-being (e.g., Gross, 1998; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Way, 2011), it is important to explore the contexts (Gross & Thompson, 2007) in which urban adolescent males may feel sufficiently safe to allow for more selective emotional expression. One possible context is that of close friendships.

Thus, our primary aim was to assess the degree to which dyads of close male adolescent friends from an urban setting engage in emotional expression and response, and to explore some of the underlying expression and response processes that may be affected by urban and masculine norms. Much of what we already know about emotional expression comes from studies that have employed non-dyadic research designs, such as self report or experimental manipulation, and those that have explored emotional expression to others have typically utilized a confederate, an experimenter, or an unknown research participant (e.g., Butler et al., 2003; Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994; Pennebaker et al., 1990; Rose et al., 2012). Thus, we utilized a dyadic research design within the specific context of close male friendship to build upon this prior work.

Adolescence is an ideal time to study emotional expression in urban adolescent male friendships, since prior research demonstrates that the peer group becomes increasingly important during this stage (e.g., Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). Additionally, same-sex peers typically make up the primary support network (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Close friendships comprise an ideal context in which to study emotional expression and adherence to masculine norms because they have the potential to serve multiple functions. For example, boys can receive both emotional support and/or emotional policing in their friendships (e.g., Chu, 2014; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Way, 2011). Emotional policing refers to a type of *policing of masculinity* (POM), i.e., any action that serves to prevent or punish individual or group behavior perceived as insufficiently masculine (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). Common examples are misogynistic and homophobic epithets along with other behaviors. In consideration of previous research noted above, we expected that urban boys might display high levels of emotional repression and frequently engage in POM due to the influence of ecological factors related to class, urban environment, and masculine gender socialization.

From our primary aim and hypothesis, we developed the following research questions:

  i. To what extent, and in what ways, do urban adolescent males emotionally express themselves when disclosing an emotionally difficult experience to a close male friend?
 ii. To what extent, and in what ways, do urban adolescent males respond to a close male friend's emotional disclosure?
iii. What patterns, if any, can be discerned in urban adolescent boys' emotional disclosures and the ensuing response from a close male friend?

Through exploration of these questions, we strived to better understand the extent to which urban adolescent males engage in and respond to emotional disclosure within the friendship context, and some of the underlying processes through which they do so.

Method

We conducted the current analyses on a subset of boys (N = 40) in 10th through 12th grades selected from a larger, quantitative study (N = 172) on emotional expressivity between urban adolescent boys (Pollastri, 2010), in which boys participated in a disclosure task together with a close male friend and completed self- and peer-report measures. We focused this study on a subset of the larger sample for the purpose of in-depth qualitative exploration. Of note, although race was not a subsample selection criterion, the subsample was moderately racially and ethnically diverse (17% African American, African, or Black, 13% Asian–American, Asian, or Indian, 30% European–American or European, 37% Latino, and 3% multi-racial).

We recruited participants from a racially and socio-economically diverse public high school in a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States. The urban context of this city is characterized by moderate racial and ethnic diversity, socio-economic stratification, and a large refugee presence. Many of this city's neighborhoods struggle with elevated crime and poverty statistics above urban national averages. Consistent with school-wide statistics, seventy-one percent of study participants were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch due to family economic status. Forty-six percent of participants reported that their primary language spoken at home was something other than English.

Researchers obtained approval for this research study from the Institutional Review Boards of the university, as well as the public school system in which the research was conducted. Due to the age of the participants (mean age = 16.8) and the minimal risk designation, researchers obtained active participant assent and passive parental consent for participation (in the form of a letter and consent form sent home and an automated phone message from the school). Six parents declined consent for their sons' participation, and those boys were not contacted.

In the study, participants engaged in a dyadic emotional disclosure task for the purpose of obtaining an observational measure of emotional expressivity with a close male friend. The emotional disclosure took place in a reserved room at the participants' school to minimize the effects of a "laboratory" setting. Following a five-minute practice disclosure task, the participant initially recruited for the study (referred to as P1) was asked to speak to his friend (P2) for 10 min from a choice of three urban stressors that he had previously endorsed as "still bothersome" on a Life Events Checklist (LEC). The LEC includes 42 items covering three types of stressors that have been found most relevant to youth in urban environments: neighborhood disadvantage, individual negative life events, and daily hassles (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). These items were compiled from the Economic Hassles and Discrimination subscales of the Multicultural Events Scale for Adolescents (MESA; Gonzales, Hunoe, Jackson, & Sammaniego, 1995); the Social Disadvantage and Coercion subscale of the Urban Hassles Index (UHI; Miller & Townsend, 2005); and the Survey of Children's Exposure to Community Violence (SCECV; Richters & Saltzman, 1990). Sample items include, "You walked past abandoned buildings or lots" and "You were threatened with serious physical harm." During the disclosure task, consistent with prior research (e.g., Butler et al., 2003), the disclosing participant was instructed to answer three questions about the specific item chosen from the LEC: What happened?; What was your personal reaction at the time?; and How does it affect you to think about it now? Furthermore, P1 was asked to discuss this event in a manner similar to how he would typically speak to this friend about a similar topic, and P2 was asked to respond as he normally would.

Subsample selection

In selecting the subsample of 40 boys (20 dyads) for the current study, we applied pre-established selection criteria to participants' responses on the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman, 1996) and the Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES; revised from original; Kring et al., 1994). During the screening phase of recruitment, the boy who later became the disclosing participant (P1) had been asked to name his three closest male friends, one of whom was later selected by the research team to respond to his disclosure (P2). To further ensure that the dyad would be comprised of close friends, at the time of subsample selection, we administered the NRI. The NRI is a 43-item measure of friendship quality focused on social support and negative interchanges. A sample NRI item includes, "How much do you protect and look out for this person?" The NRI has been used repeatedly with ethnically diverse populations with excellent reliability (Way & Greene, 2006). In this study, subscale reliabilities ranged from $\alpha = .84$ to .87, and reliability for the index score was $\alpha = .95$. We selected boys who reported greater-than-median friendship quality as measured by the *total social support* sum score of the NRI (Median = 3.15, SD = .72), which is a composite of nine subscales.

We used the EES to ensure the inclusion of participants representing a range of emotional expressivity. The original EES is a 17-item measure of the degree to which an individual expresses his emotions to others. A sample item is, "I can't hide how I am feeling." We revised the EES to assess self-reports of general emotional expressivity, first when the participant is with "people that you know well" such as "family members or friends that you are close to" (EES-F). A second version, completed after the disclosure task, assessed self-report of emotional expressivity during the disclosure task (i.e., EES-T). In this study, internal reliability of the EES versions ranged from $\alpha = .86$ to .87. We selected participants whose EES-F and EES-T scores were more than 1/4 standard deviations above or below the median (Median = 71.65, 1/4 SD = 3.52), resulting in a subsample that included participants who endorsed both high and low expressivity in different contexts, maximizing variability.

Table 1
Emotional expression codes, characterizations, themes, and frequencies.

Coding examples	Summative characterization examples	Themes and frequency
Emotionally vulnerable statement; mutual vulnerability; joint laughter; expresses feeling validated; utilizes soft emotion words	Consistently vulnerable; Vulnerable and playful; and Increasing vulnerability over time	1. Vulnerable and expressive (35%)
Defensive; assertions of toughness; entreats friend to listen/support him; prematurely ends disclosure; joking with friend; masculine posturing; changes subject; sarcastic	Initial vulnerability, defensive, gives up disclosure; Emotionally expressive, defensive, submissive; and Decreasing emotionality, increasing control	2. Defensive and diminishing expressivity (35%)
False start; defensive; masculine posturing; jokes with friend; laughter; quasi-emotional expression (incl. laughter/joking); brief emotional expression	Hesitant, uncomfortable, and defensive; and Tentative expressiveness and guarded, with masculine posturing	3. Guarded and ambivalent (20%)
Laughter; jokes with friend; expresses anger; masculine posturing; sarcasm	Emotionally disengaged, consistent joking and masculine posturing	4. Emotionally disengaged (10%)

Analytic plan

To meet our research objectives, we chose thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) as our primary methodology for its ability to flexibly explore and identify meaningful patterns within the data set. At the start, trained research assistants transcribed the video- and audio-recorded disclosure task data using pre-established transcription guidelines. The first author reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. Then, separately, the first and second authors coded the data for interpersonal exchanges composed of emotional expressions and ensuing responses between P1 and P2 (see Tables 1 and 2 for coding examples). For our purposes, we will use the term *interpersonal exchanges* to refer to communication events between the disclosing and listening participants that comprise their joint interaction. We focused our analysis on interpersonal exchanges that appeared to either bolster or stifle a participant's ability and/or willingness to emotionally express himself; that is, both obvious and subtle events that contribute to a participant exhibiting or disguising emotional vulnerability. While the coding and analysis focused on the participants' words, the first and second authors also watched the video-recordings to gain a deeper understanding of other contextual elements, mannerisms, and the overall tenor of each disclosure. The first and second authors were aware that our conceptions of emotionally expressive behaviors would not necessarily align with boys' conceptions and displays of emotional expression. Thus, we attempted to be flexible in considering how emotional expression and vulnerability might appear for urban adolescent males through attunement to cultural, linguistic, and developmental differences, such as urban slang and idioms and masculine gender socialization (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Froyum, 2007; Majors & Billson, 1993; Way, 2011). To assess inter-coder agreement, we performed check coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and jointly resolved any coding disagreements through discussion. Inter-coder agreement for the first round of coding was 89%.

Next, using the coded emotional expressions and responses, we independently arrived at summative characterizations for each participant meant to broadly represent his presentation and degree of engagement in the disclosure task (see Tables 1 and 2 for examples). Inter-coder agreement for the summative characterizations coding was 90%. Using these summative characterizations, we discussed and agreed upon thematic patterns that broadly represented disclosing participants' differing degrees of emotional expression and their friends' engagement, or lack thereof, in listening and responding to the disclosure. We also identified commonly occurring emotional expression and response mechanisms and processes. To finalize each theme, we agreed upon thematic titles, overarching descriptions, and representative data extracts.

For interpreting our data and findings, we utilized an ecologically-based theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological models for behavior and development are applicable to the study of emotional expression in urban adolescent males for their ability to consider and account for the possible influence of multiple intersecting systems (e.g., Collins, 2000; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Hooks, 1981). In consideration of findings suggesting that urban boys and men may be especially vulnerable to emotional restriction (e.g., Addis, 2011; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999), we focused this study on better understanding the microsystem of the peer group, and specifically close friendships, as one possible source with the potential to contribute to instances of emotional expression and/or repression. We also considered other overlapping ecological layers, including cultural attitudes and ideologies (i.e., gender socialization processes and norms) and the immediate environment and neighborhood (i.e., urban context and norms).

Results and interpretation

These results are intended to characterize the types of interpersonal exchanges that surface when an urban adolescent male discloses an emotionally evocative experience to a close male friend. First, we describe themes that emerged from our

Table 2

Response to disclosure codes, characterizations, themes, and frequencies.

Coding examples	Summative characterization examples	Themes and frequency
Positive affirmation of emotion; acknowledgment of shared experience/mutual vulnerability; patient listening; non-judgmental/ inquisitive questioning	Affirming and mutually vulnerable; and Generally affirming, mutually vulnerable, some corrective behavior	1. Affirming and supportive (50%)
Critical/persistent questioning; interrupting; dismissive; masculine posturing; self-status boosting; mocking laughter; minimization of disclosure; non-empathic problem solving	Critical and confrontational; Controlling, emotionally dismissive, and masculine posturing; and Mocking, disbelieving, and delegitimizing	2. Critical and unsupportive (35%)
Reciprocates masculine posturing; expresses agreement; reciprocal laughter or joking	Joins with friend in masculine posturing and joking; and Agreeable and attentive responses	3. Playful and aligning (15%)

analysis of the extent to which, and some of the underlying processes through which, urban adolescent males emotionally expressed to a close friend. Next, we discuss themes in the ways that urban adolescent males responded to a close male friend's emotional disclosure. Finally, we explore general patterns between the tenor of participants' emotional disclosures and the ensuing responses from their close male friends. While we focus on urban adolescent males' varying levels of engagement in emotional disclosure and response, we also discuss some of the process elements that emerged with regard to how participants emotionally disclosed or responded to their friend. For illustrative purposes, we present the disclosure and response types separately; however, we view emotional expression and response as a fully interactional and context-dependent process.

Disclosure types

From the disclosures, we identified four overarching themes representing participants' varying approaches to emotional expressivity during a 10-min disclosure task: *vulnerable and expressive*, *defensive and diminishing expressivity*, *guarded and ambivalent*, and *emotionally disengaged*. While our coding scheme was developed in response to the specific content from the disclosures, multiple codes generated from this study (e.g., "minimization," "dismissive," "inquisitive questioning," "affirmation," "laughter and joking," and "mutual vulnerability") overlap in meaning with emotional codes from other studies (e.g., Rose, Smith, Glick, & Schwartz-Mette, 2016). See Table 1 for a list of codes, summative characterizations, themes, and percentage of participants that fell within each thematic category. Participants spoke about a range of topics including robbery, fighting, gunfire and threats from guns, running from gangs, physical victimization, racial epithets and racism, being stereotyped, and family financial struggles and job loss. They also drew upon a range of idioms and expressions some of which represented urban slang.

Vulnerable and expressive (35% of disclosing participants). The participants in the vulnerable and expressive group were observed as emotionally expressive throughout the disclosure. In general, they appeared to adjust more quickly to the task and did not require as much time to assess the situation and their friend. For example, an 18-year-old African American male quickly transitioned into his disclosure about financial struggles:

> We owe a lot of money man, like, we having mad trouble. And I don't even know–I don't know what's going on. My Mom used to get, um like, money from the government … And I'm only a child … I am not the one supposed to provide for a family, not yet.

This participant immediately made himself vulnerable by referring to his feelings of uncertainty and fears about the future. Like other participants in this group, he appeared to feel supported and validated as evidenced by his displaying continued and, at times, increasing levels of vulnerability. Along with using statements and words indicative of harder emotions, such as anger (e.g., "real mad," "get tight," and "pisses me off"), these participants frequently expressed softer emotions, such as fear and sadness (e.g., "Things aren't going well," "felt sad," "felt stupid," "I struggled," "mad scared," and "hurt"). In addition to expressing themselves with both slang and more formal speech, these participants engaged in more mutual laughter and joint problem solving with their friends.

Defensive and diminishing expressivity (35% of disclosing participants). This group of boys began their disclosure by making themselves vulnerable; however, their expressivity decreased during the task. These participants more frequently expressed harder emotions associated with anger and frustration, including "I was pissed," "made me angry," and "get you mad" or less evocative urban slang, e.g., "It was crazy." These participants also exhibited moments of defensiveness and feeling devalued, such as a 15-year-old Latino male who rebuked his friend for not taking his disclosure seriously: "See! You're thinking this is a

joke!" They engaged in a host of behavioral processes to convey feeling unsupported including entreating their friend to listen more attentively, changing the subject, or prematurely ending the disclosure. As they became more emotionally disengaged, their behaviors shifted to joking, sarcasm, laughter, and/or joint masculine posturing with their friend (e.g., assertions of toughness).

Guarded and ambivalent (20% of disclosing participants). A third group of participants appeared guarded and ambivalent throughout their emotional disclosure. They did not disclose emotional content as immediately as the first two groups. These boys typically seemed uncomfortable and less confident as evidenced by false starts and hesitations. They also used humor and theatrical descriptions to describe seemingly frightening situations. For example, when discussing a time when he was trick-or-treating and someone pulled out a gun, a 16-year-old Black male playfully said,

> So me and [Mike] went trick-or-treating with her and my cousins … These kids were being assholes to this dude … It was mad funny and then the dude–the kid lifted up his shirt and showed his gun. And [Mike] was like, "Oh My god! He has a gun!" So, we all just ran. It was mad funny and then, um, mad crazy.

When describing his reaction, this participant appeared to use humor and less evocative urban slang, i.e., "mad funny" and "crazy," to maintain some distance from the fear that likely accompanied this event. While these participants displayed brief emotional vulnerability through urban idioms and phrases such as, "mad scared," "fucking crazy," "frozen," and "mad pet [slang for petrified]," their emotional displays were often inserted between behaviors that diluted their gravity, such as laughter or sarcasm. These participants also more frequently engaged in joint policing of masculinity (e.g., Froyum, 2007; Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) and/or posturing through assertions of toughness (e.g., Levant et al., 2008).

Emotionally disengaged (10% of disclosing participants). In contrast to these other thematic characterizations, a minority of boys appeared consistently emotionally disengaged. From the start, these participants employed laughter, made joking comments, and conveyed that they were not taking the task seriously. For example, a 16-year-old European–American male responded to the disclosure topics by exclaiming, "Blah, blah, blah!" He then turned the attention onto his friend stating,

> I heard of you getting into a fight. I was so happy for you. I didn't even care if you got your ass kicked. I was just happy that you got into a fight, that you actually, like, grew some *cojones* and, like, banged out with somebody.

By dramatically commending his friend for "getting into a fight," P1 policed his masculinity with the implication that his friend is deficient in the requisites of toughness and physical aggression, while simultaneously casting himself as more hegemonically masculine (Connell, 2000). Towards the end of the disclosure, this participant pretended to kick his friend in the testicles, and they proceeded to engage in a ritualized play-boxing match. Through their ongoing joking, laughter, sarcasm, and masculinity policing and posturing, emotionally disengaged participants averted the prospect of vulnerability and constructed themselves as emotionally disinterested, engaging in more stereotypically masculine behaviors.

Response types

In general, while responding participants (P2s) used urban slang to varying degrees, their specific utterances in response to the emotional disclosure generally consisted of more formal phrases and words. In characterizing their responses, we identified three overarching themes: *affirming and supportive*, *critical and unsupportive*, and *playful and aligning*. See Table 2 for a list of codes, summative characterizations, themes, and percentage of participants that fell within each group.

Affirming and supportive (50% of responding participants). Participants characterized as affirming and supportive quickly acknowledged their friend's emotional expression and provided immediate support and empathy. Examples of affirmative utterances used by these participants included, "Yeah," "That's horrible," "I've gotten that too," and "Oh, sorry." In addition, they often acknowledged similar challenges, making themselves reciprocally and mutually vulnerable. For example, a 15-year-old Latino male bolstered his friend's emotional disclosure by responding with, "I'd probably act the same way, you know? (laughs) … He probably could've shot you or something. It was a smart move, yo." This participant utilized an interpersonal process that we refer to as *extension* by going beyond affirming his friend's emotional expression and extending it to himself. These participants also demonstrated reflective listening capabilities and utilized non-judgmental, inquisitive questioning, e.g., "Oh yeah, what happened?" They appeared genuinely interested in and open to the content of their friend's disclosure, as opposed to other responding participants who appeared sarcastic, condemning, and/or belittling.

Critical and unsupportive (35% of responding participants). Participants in this group responded to their friend's disclosure by constructing themselves as opposed to his emotional expression. They utilized criticism, sarcasm, or intensive and mocking questioning. Examples included, "Man, get over it," "Who cares," and "That's so scary! (said sarcastically)." These participants were more prone to disapprovingly interrupt their friend's disclosure and/or demandingly state an opinion or directive. For example, in response to his friend disclosing about a verbal altercation, a 17-year-old Asian American male aggressively questioned him and instructed him to fight:

> "You punch him in the face? Because I probably would've. You probably shouldn't have put up with it. Probably should've made a scene. Because I would've done that. You know what I mean?"

Through his intensive questioning and interrupting, this participant policed his friend's masculinity and compromised his ability to emotionally disclose. Consequently, he momentarily boosted his own status through the implication of being more physically capable and aggressive. In general, critical and unsupportive participants more frequently utilized policing of

masculinity, such as a 16-year-old European–American male who exclaimed, "Those pants are gay!" Following a prolonged interrogation of his friend's emotional disclosure, this participant utilized POM to further solidify his disapproval by accusing him of possessing "feminine" and/or "gay" attributes.

Playful and aligning (15% of responding participants). These participants responded flexibly to their friend's disclosure or lack thereof, neither engaging in outright support nor dismissal. They appeared to take cues from their disclosing friend and seemed more invested in relational alignment, as evidenced by commonly uttering responses of "Yeah" and mirroring his demeanor. For example, a 15-year-old Asian American male responded to his friend's story of someone breaking into his house to steal a video game system, which had been told in a dramatic and playful manner, stating, "Yeah! (laughs). That was so funny man! (laughs)." In aligning with their friends, these participants readily joined in a host of behaviors including joking, laughter, masculinity policing, and/or posturing. In another example, in response to hearing his friend use the derogatory term, "gay n*gger," to describe a peer, a 17-year-old Latino male reiterated and emphasized his friend's statement saying, "A gay-ass n*gger!" By engaging in repetition, he aligned with his friend and momentarily constructed himself as in agreement. Overall, playful and aligning participants appeared to respond to their friends with levity, playfulness, and general cooperation.

Disclosure and response patterns

Following the completion of thematic coding, we explored the relationships between disclosure and response types for meaningful patterns. In conceptualizing emotional expression and response as an interactional process, we were curious to investigate whether meaningful patterns existed between dyads of close male friends. Adding some validation to our coding scheme, and in support of the interpersonal nature of emotional expression and response, results suggest that there are consistent patterns between disclosure and response types. See Table 3 for patterns that we identified.

The pattern that exhibited the highest level of agreement was between disclosing participants characterized as *vulnerable and expressive* and listening/responding participants who appeared *affirming and supportive* (7 dyads). For example, a 15-year-old Latino disclosing participant (P1) and his 16-year-old Latino friend (P2) demonstrated this dynamic [coding examples in brackets]:

P1: When I was, like, little, I used to live in the (urban neighborhood), and I used to walk around weird buildings and abandoned buildings [immediate engagement in disclosure]. One of the times, I almost got killed. I never want to go, like, inside an abandoned building because I think something bad is going to happen. [emotionally vulnerable statement]
P2: That's crazy! (laughter) [supportive laughter and exclamation]
P1: I know! It is crazy. It's just—What can I say? The (urban neighborhood) is like that … [continued engagement in disclosure]
P2: So you lived in a bad neighborhood over there? [inquisitive]
P1: Yeah, when I was small because back then it was worse than now … I was scared, I was nervous. [utilizes soft emotion words] You know? [seeks affirmation] I was nine years old. You know? There was big people there … [continued engagement in disclosure]
P2: I would be scared. I would be mad scared. I probably would've turned around and ran [mutual vulnerability and affirmation] … Crazy experiences, yo. When you are small, you experience a lot of things."

As this disclosure unfolded, the disclosing participant expressed himself vulnerably, i.e., "I was scared." His friend consistently met his emotional expressions with affirmative utterances, expressed curiosity through his questions, and legitimized his experience through reciprocal vulnerability. In this exchange, both participants appeared jointly invested in fostering a mutually vulnerable, expressive, and supportive connection with one another.

Another primary pattern with a high level of agreement was between disclosing participants characterized as *defensive and diminishing expressivity* and responding participants who appeared *critical and unsupportive* (6 dyads). The below example between 17- and 15-year-old Latino male friends illustrates this pattern:

P1: All right. So going up there, I hear gunshots, like, up and down the street, almost all the time … [immediate engagement in disclosure]

Table 3
Number of matching dyads in each disclosure and response type.

		Disclosure type			
		Vulnerable and expressive	Defensive/Diminishing expressivity	Guarded and ambivalent	Emotionally disengaged
Response type	Affirming and supportive	7 dyads	1 dyad	1 dyad	–
	Critical and unsupportive	–	6 dyads	1 dyad	–
	Playful and aligning	–	–	2 dyads	2 dyads

P2: That's pretty amazing! [sarcastic exclamation]

P1: It is! [defensive] Because if it's happening right outside your window, and your room is right there, and your bed is right there, you know, you start thinking. [continued engagement in disclosure]

P2: So, why don't you just go in the fucking closet? Go in the closet and duck your head! [non-empathic problem solving/ minimization]

P1: Because my closet door is that weak. [defensive]

P2: Oh yeah. When I was in the (urban neighborhood), I heard gunshots outside. I slept like a baby. [masculine posturing/ self-status boosting]

P1: But yeah, that's the thing. I don't sleep like a baby. Like, I'm the total opposite of you. [elevates defensiveness]

P2: Oh really? (laughs) [mocking question with laughter]

P1: Yeah, stop it! No! [defensive] It scared me, though, to tell you the truth … [emotionally vulnerable statement] You know? I have to—I want to live up to my full potential. [ongoing vulnerability]

P2: Me too, but if my time comes, it comes … [matter-of-fact response]

P1: And then, there was another time … Pay attention! [entreats friend to listen] … I found out that same exact night on channel something—on the news. They was filming this. You know, cops showed up … Now what was going on with the guy? He shot somebody, two houses down. And he shot, and he ran, and then cops surrounded him. [story telling/ continued engagement]

P2: (laughter) … [minimizes/interrupts story]

P1: This is awhile back, right, knowing that I could've died that same night too … [vulnerable statement]

P2: (laughter) [minimizes/interrupts]

P1: So what happened was—I don't even remember what happened (laughs). [prematurely ends story/joins in laughter/ play fighting]

At the start, this participant emotionally expressed himself using soft emotion words associated with fear. His friend responded with sarcasm and masculine posturing to critique his vulnerable admission, while positioning himself as unfazed by danger. Impressively, P1 persisted in his disclosure and tried to discuss an additional emotionally evocative event. The listening participant continued to laugh and joke, while downplaying the significance of his disclosing friend's concerns. In response to this consistently critical and unsupportive response by P2, P1 finally and abruptly transitioned away from his emotionally vulnerable and serious tone and joined his friend in joking and rough housing. Consequently, they then engaged in a more factual discussion about a firefighter who was shot.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to better understand the interpersonal process that unfolds when an urban adolescent male discloses an emotionally distressing experience to a close male friend using an ecological and intersectional theoretical framework. Specifically, we explored whether the participants in our study would more fully succumb to urban and masculine norms for low emotional expression or whether close male friendship would serve as an ecological buffer to support emotional disclosure. While we focused our investigation on the degree to which dyads of close male friends are able to engage in emotional expression and response, we also explored some of the underlying expression and response processes. Furthermore, we investigated whether meaningful expression and response patterns existed between dyads of close male friends.

Through employing a dyadic and observational research design, we extended previous work on emotional expression, the majority of which have utilized non-dyadic research designs or asked participants to disclose to an unknown other (e.g., Butler et al., 2003; Kring et al., 1994; Pennebaker et al., 1990; Rose et al., 2012). While this previous work has made highly important contributions, it has been limited in clarifying the context-specific elements and complexities of emotional expression and response between close friends (e.g., Gross & Thompson, 2007). Furthermore, emotional expression can be oversimplified as a stable dispositional quality, as opposed to a more interpersonally dependent and context-specific process that typically involves intersecting ecological systems. In this study, we honed in on the context of close male friendship, and strived to help clarify the variable influence that overlapping ecological layers, i.e., masculine gender socialization and urban norms, can have on emotional expression and response.

Results suggest that urban adolescent males, whether the emotional discloser or the responder, exhibit a wide range of behaviors when participating in dyadic emotional disclosure and response, including both conformity and resistance to hegemonic masculine norms (e.g., Connell, 2000; Way et al., 2014). In many ways, the interpersonal exchanges that unfolded between dyads of close male friends represent what we would expect in researching a broad cross-section of society, i.e., a wide range of expression and response styles. However, more importantly, and expanding on previous findings about boys and emotional expressivity (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1993; Oransky & Marecek, 2009), many participants demonstrated their capacity to be highly expressive, supportive and emotionally connected in the context of close male friendship. Some previous research has found that boys can be activity-oriented in their friendships (for a review: Rose & Rudolph, 2006) and experience influential and ongoing societal messages to conform to dominant masculine norms, such as emotional restriction, toughness, and invincibility (e.g., Levant et al., 2008). While boys can clearly enjoy active play

and experience substantial gender socialization pressures, the participants in this study also demonstrated many boys' abilities to subvert and resist masculine norms (e.g., Way et al., 2014) in the context of close male friendship.

Of the disclosing participants, the majority of boys appeared highly capable of emotional expression, as evidenced by their inclusion in two thematic groupings: *vulnerable and expressive* or *defensive and diminishing expressivity*. The remaining disclosing participants appeared *guarded and ambivalent* or *emotionally disengaged.* It is noteworthy that while social stereotypes might lead us to expect many urban boys (as well as boys in general) to be emotionally disengaged, this was the group least represented in our sample. Of the four disclosure types, while some participants expressed clear and consistent emotional vulnerability or disengagement, many boys fluctuated in their disclosure demonstrating the influence of contextual and situational factors. The reactions of boys who appeared more hesitant or became visibly uncomfortable, i.e., defensive and diminishing expressivity or guarded and ambivalent, support previous findings that emotional disclosure can make some boys feel "weird" (Rose et al., 2012). Overall, these findings represent the variation in boys' emotional expressions as they navigate an interpersonally dependent and contextually situated disclosure task. Furthermore, they showcase that boys can be highly expressive when feeling supported by a close male friend, with some boys persisting in spite of negative feedback.

As noted in the results, disclosing participants utilized differing communication mechanisms when expressing themselves. We will further explore some of these processes later in the discussion section, such as urban slang versus formal language and the role of laughter and joking. In considering the different process elements, for the most part, urban adolescent males used interpersonal and communication methods that aligned with their level of engagement in the dyadic exchange and some of which support findings from previous research. For example, the vulnerable and expressive participants utilized the most soft emotion words; participants who exhibited defensive and diminishing expressivity often engaged in changing the subject, joking, and/or masculine posturing behaviors when shifting away from their disclosure (e.g., Levant et al., 2008; Rose et al., 2016); guarded and ambivalent participants had more instances of false starts and hesitations; and emotionally disengaged participants typically related to their friends through joking (e.g., Rose et al., 2016).

For the responding participants, the majority appeared *affirming and supportive*, with a lower percentage seeming *critical and unsupportive*, and a minority of boys responded to their friends with *playful and aligning* responses. Participants who responded in an affirming and supportive way challenged the stereotype that boys and men are biologically less capable of, or disinclined to, providing emotional support (e.g., Gray, 1992). Furthermore, these results strengthen previous findings that emotional expression is an intricate and context-specific inter- and intrapersonal process with a range of manifestations (e.g., Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Way, 2011). They also provide support for findings that boys and men are capable of both conforming to and/or resisting dominant masculine norms and sometimes do so in combination (e.g., Connell, 2000; Way et al., 2014). The responding participants also utilized differing interpersonal and communicative processes depending on the quality of their listening and response. For example, the affirming and supportive participants often listened reflectively, asked non-judgmental questions, and engaged in a process that we call *extension* or reciprocal vulnerability; the critical and unsupportive participants more frequently interrupted the discloser through sarcasm, joking, and/or masculinity policing or posturing; and the playful and aligning participants typically mirrored their friend's sentiments and demeanor, such as through repetition or *mimicry*.

In addition to utilizing a variety of interpersonal and communicative processes, participants commonly engaged in laughter and joking regardless of their expression or response type. At times, laughter appeared to create a safe space for the disclosure and to facilitate closeness by keeping the mood less tense, while enabling emotional expression and interpersonal connection (Rose et al., 2016). During more emotionally heightened and evocative moments, some participants seemed to use laughter and joking as a response to uncertainty and nervousness (Francis, 1994). Participants also may have been aware that, through emotional expression and/or providing support, they were straying from dominant masculine norms and conventions (e.g., Way et al., 2014). Thus, their laughter could have served to acknowledge and assuage this perceived transgression. Still other boys employed laughter and joking, in conjunction with policing of masculinity, to demean and shame a disclosing friend with the likely intent to "correct" that boy's behavior (e.g., Frosh et al., 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). In some cases, laughter and joking also indicated mutual disengagement in the task and/or appeared to facilitate relational bonding. The urban adolescent males in our study demonstrated the intricacies of and many functions that laughter and joking can serve for emotional expression and response.

Not surprisingly, the different types of emotional disclosure and responding were related. Potentially, the most noteworthy and important finding from the study was that all boys who disclosed in a vulnerable and expressive manner participated with friends who responded with affirmation and support. It is worth restating that during recruitment, and prior to being invited to participate in a study on emotional expression, the boy who later became the disclosing participant (P1) was asked to name his three closest male friends, one of whom was later selected to participate (P2). Thus, this finding raises a number of interesting questions and considerations about friendship dynamics. For instance, do boys who are more expressive tend to seek out and find friends who are more accepting of their vulnerability and candor? Prior research on friendship suggests that individuals often seek out others who are similar to them (for review: Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). The fact that all of the boys who disclosed in a vulnerable and expressive manner paired with affirming and supportive friends may have been, in part, due to the fact that these boys share a common openness to emotional expression and resistance to hegemonic masculine norms. We can imagine that if the roles were reversed the disclosing participants might be thoughtful and affirming listeners, and the listeners might also disclose with a high degree of expressivity. Alternatively, it is possible that friends who are more accepting of expressivity convey support through their listening and responding, thus

making it easier for their friends to emotionally disclose and resist dominant masculine norms? These results highlight the important contribution that dyadic research designs can make to better understanding emotional expression and response interactively and in contextually specific ways.

Further evidence in support of the important contribution of dyadic research to better understanding emotional expression and response comes from the results that six out of seven critical and unsupportive participants participated with a friend who exhibited defensive and diminishing expressivity. In these cases, while P1 initially resisted masculine norms by making himself vulnerable (e.g., Way et al., 2014), P2 immediately countered his efforts through a range of behaviors including mocking and policing of masculinity (e.g., Frosh et al., 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). These specific dyadic examples illustrate the influential role that peers can serve in shaping behavior through punishment and fear-based learning (e.g., Addis, 2011; Kimmel, 1994) and enforcing dominant gender norms (e.g., emotional restriction). Thus, for these disclosing participants, their abilities to emotionally express appeared stifled in this specific contextualized interaction of disclosing to an unsupportive friend.

Interestingly, dyads in which disclosers were emotionally disengaged and responders were playful and aligning exhibited both relational alignment and conformity to masculine norms (Levant et al., 2008). These boys appeared aligned through their amicable interpersonal exchanges, while "safely" maintaining their distance from emotional expression and vulnerability. Through their constant flow of joking, laughter, sarcasm, and masculinity policing and posturing, both participants in these dyads undermined the disclosure task and positioned themselves as emotionally disinterested. If we were to create a typology from social stereotypes and hegemonic masculine norms for how we might expect boys to engage in an emotion disclosure task, we would cast boys as emotionally restricted, playful, and lacking in seriousness. However, only two dyads of participants in the sample (i.e., emotionally disengaged/playful and aligning) met this more stereotypical conception of adolescent male relationships.

In analyzing the data and interpreting these findings, we were reminded of the importance of attunement to cultural, linguistic, and developmental differences for researching emotional expression in urban adolescent males. The urban adolescent males in our study often evocatively expressed emotions, such as fear or feeling upset, using slang and urban idioms reflective of cultural influences, e.g., "mad scared," "fucking crazy," "frozen," and "mad pet [petrified]." If not attuned to urban norms and language, it could be easy to overlook instances of vulnerability and emotional expression in some urban adolescent boys (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Froyum, 2007; Majors & Billson, 1993; Way, 2011). Furthermore, in consideration of vulnerable emotional expression typically being construed as a feminine enterprise (e.g., Levant et al., 2008; Oransky & Marecek, 2009), some of the ways boys and men express themselves may be less socially recognized. Thus, when understood as expressions of vulnerability, these words do not convey the hegemonic masculinity ideologies (e.g., invincibility, dominance, and emotional stoicism) that we might expect from adolescent boys based on stereotypes (Levant et al., 2008). However, the use of harsher sounding urban slang to communicate soft emotions may help some boys navigate pressures associated with dominant masculine norms and elevated levels of threat in their communities (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Froyum, 2007; Majors & Billson, 1993). In addition to their widespread use of urban slang to express emotion, many participants also communicated distress and emotional vulnerability using traditional soft emotion words and phrases, such as "felt sad," "nervous," "hurt," and "I struggled." Thus, whether using urban idioms or traditional soft emotion words, many urban adolescent males demonstrated their capacity to resist urban and masculine norms for low emotional expression and find safe outlets within close male friendships through which to make themselves vulnerable (e.g., Chu, 2014; Way et al., 2014).

In addition to expressing softer emotions, such as sadness, fear, and anxiety, participants also communicated harder emotions, such as anger. Previous research indicates that harder emotional expressions are socially acceptable for males and, in many contexts, socially rewarded (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Levant et al., 2008) which can contribute to boys and men exhibiting greater levels of externalizing emotions than girls (for review: Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Compared to the vulnerable and expressive participants, the participants whose expressivity diminished during their disclosure more frequently expressed harder emotions. In these cases, the use of harder emotions may be due to multiple factors, including the result of cumulative social learning that favors externalizing behaviors (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Levant et al., 2008), an attempt to impress a friend or peers (e.g., Frosh et al., 2002; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Oransky & Marecek, 2009), or a response to a perceived threat or punishment (e.g., Addis, 2011; Kimmel, 1994), such as a friend appearing critical and unsupportive. Previous findings indicate that boys and men who disproportionately defer to hard emotions and externalizing behaviors can be more at risk for a host of negative psychological, relational, and health consequences including emotional silence and invisibility and resistance to help seeking (Addis, 2011) and increased suicidal risk and substance abuse (for review: Courtenay, 2000).

Conclusion

In sum, this study extends our understanding of emotional expression and response processes for urban adolescent males. Contrary to dominant stereotypes about boys in general, urban boys possess significant variability in the extent to which they engage in and how they approach emotional disclosure and response. More notably, the majority of boys in our study showed their ability to make themselves emotionally vulnerable or provide empathic support to a close male friend. Many participants also demonstrated the capacity for expressive flexibility that may be especially important for urban boys who encounter a higher level and frequency of threats in their environments; an area worthy of further exploration. Furthermore,

these results highlight that, in spite of certain ecological factors such as cultural attitudes, gender ideologies, and the immediate environment that can pressure boys and men to emotionally repress, many urban adolescent males can find ways to resist hegemonic masculine norms within the context of close friendship. Thus, while elevated stressors inherent in low-income, urban environments are a daily reality for urban adolescent males, many participants in our study found ways to temporarily resist these pressures through emotional vulnerability and empathic responses.

Limitations of this study provide opportunities for future research. First, although our observations indicated that most boys engaged authentically in the disclosure task, some participants likely experienced inhibition due to the presence of a video camera and instructions to emotionally express themselves. In the future, it will be important to consider more naturalistic means through which to observe emotional expression and response in urban adolescent boys. Second, in using a focused qualitative exploration as our primary analytic methodology, we sacrificed the ability to generalize emotional expression and response processes to a larger population. Third, we limited this study to boys; however, in consideration that urban adolescent girls also experience elevated environmental stressors, it will be important to conduct similar research with that population.

Other areas of future research include further explorations of masculinities and expressivity. With regard to many participants' resistance to dominant masculine norms, it will be important to explore the underlying social learning influences and mechanisms, and other micro and macro influencing factors, for these boys. Additionally, follow-up research could explore whether the emotional expression and response types identified in this research predict outcomes relevant to boys' social and emotional well-being. Furthermore, building on these friendship findings, future research should investigate other specific contextual and relational factors that help to foster emotional expression and empathic support in adolescent boys. The further exploration of boys' multi-faceted utilization of laughter through which to emotionally express themselves and communicate is an area ripe for future research. Finally, in consideration of health and social consequences associated with restricted emotional displays, it will be important to better understand ways to help boys find safe outlets for making themselves vulnerable, such as with close male friends.

Acknowledgments

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