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# Social Context, Emotional Expressivity, and Social Adjustment in Adolescent Males

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Research has consistently found that expressing emotion related to distressing events promotes social adjustment (Rimé, 2007, 2009), whereas suppression of negative emotion has social costs (e.g., Gross & John, 2003). However, prior research has largely failed to take into account the degree of relationship between the distressed individual and the person to whom the distressed individual is speaking, and the social norms of the population to which the distressed individual belongs. Considering these factors, the relationship between emotional expressivity and social adjustment may be more complicated than the emotional regulation literature would suggest. Thus, the primary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between social adjustment and emotional expressivity toward friends and nonfriends in a sample of late adolescent males, through the lens of masculinity research that suggests that low emotional expressivity may be adaptive for males in certain contexts. Adolescent boys ( $N = 178$ ) reported the degree to which they expressed emotion to friends and to nonfriends (which includes acquaintances and strangers). Results indicated that for these boys, emotional expressivity was associated with better social adjustment only when the expression of emotion occurred within the context of friendship. Additionally, boys who exhibited greater “expressive flexibility,” expressing more to friends than nonfriends, reported the greatest social adjustment.

*Keywords:* emotional expression, masculinity, adolescents, social

Regulation of experienced emotion includes many components, including an individual’s selection of the situation, deployment of attention, modification of the situation, and the resulting behavior or response (Frijda, 1986; Gross, 1998; Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Oatley, 1992; Scherer, 1984). One element of the resulting response includes observable verbal and nonverbal actions that reflect an affective response or state, termed “emotional expression” (Flannery, Torquati, & Lindemeier, 1994; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). Although emotional expression comprises a small part of the emotional sequence, it has often been considered central to psychological study and therapeutic practice.

Laboratory research has suggested that disclosing emotion has a variety of social benefits, such as increased likability, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994; Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), whereas suppressing emotion is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including decreased communication and decreased

reports of rapport by a partner (Butler, Egloff, Wilhelm, Smith, Erickson, & Gross, 2003; Richards & Gross, 1999, 2006). Similar findings have been reported in studies of dispositional emotional expressivity, which have focused on correlates of individuals’ general tendency to outwardly express emotion (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994). The prototypical research study on emotional expressivity includes self, peer, or parent reports of a participant’s general tendency to express emotion to others, which is then correlated with a number of observed or reported outcomes. Although limited, research on dispositional emotional expressivity suggests that individuals who are more generally expressive have better social outcomes compared with those who are less expressive. For example, self reported emotional expressivity has been positively associated with marital relationship satisfaction (King, 1993), closeness of cross-sex friendships (Morry, 2005), and quality of leadership in business organizations (Groves, 2006). Correspondingly, studies examining self-reported habitual suppression of emotion have found associations with lower social support, lower peer-rated likability, and reduced relationship closeness (e.g., Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004; Jamner, Schwartz, & Leigh, 1988). In sum, converging evidence supports the notion that both discrete acts of emotional disclosure as well as dispositional emotional expressivity can improve social relationships.

## Why Is Emotional Expression a Good Thing?

The mechanism that underlies the robust physical and psychological benefits associated with emotional disclosure and expressivity is still largely unknown and is the subject of great debate

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Analyses and ideas presented in this article have not been presented previously. Data from the larger project with these participants were included in a prior publication (see Reigeluth, Pollastri, Cardemil, & Addis, 2016)

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(King, 2002; Frattaroli, 2006). Historically, it was assumed that the mechanism for psychological change after disclosure of an emotional event was emotional recovery; that is, reduction of the negative emotions related to that particular event (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999) through processes such as catharsis (Scheff, 1979), exposure (Mendolia & Kleck, 1993), or cognitive change related to the event (Tait & Silver, 1989; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). However, Zech and Rimé (2005) reveal that there is little evidence for disclosure of an emotional event leading to emotional recovery of that particular event by any traditional measures of the emotional salience of that event.

If the benefits associated with emotional expression are not due to objective emotional recovery from the disclosed event, then why do so many participants report subjective benefits? In a thoughtful review and commentary, Pennebaker (2003) describes the emergence of a theory that posits social integration as the mechanism of change. Pennebaker asserts that when an individual chooses not to share an emotional event with others, it interferes with the social support that the individual might have received if he or she had chosen to share, and also isolates the individual in other subtle ways; the individual's distraction with his or her own turmoil likely results in distracted listening and emotional unavailability to others. As a result, friends are likely to find interactions with that individual less satisfying and may be less motivated to talk about their own emotional events, thereby continuing the cycle. Rimé (2007) extends these ideas, especially as they are relevant to what he has called the "social sharing of emotion," which includes verbal disclosure between individuals, often friends, rather than in writing or to a researcher. Rimé concludes that social sharing is beneficial primarily because of socioaffective processes rather than the cognitive processes. That is, frequently the listener responds in a way that results in an increased bond between the sharer and listener, and ultimately the sharer feels better. A number of research studies provide evidence in support of the idea that expressing a secret or emotion can improve social processes, either with the listener, or with others in the social network (Graham et al., 2008; Heffner-Johnson, 2002; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Richards & Gross, 1999). Thus, emerging evidence supports the notion that both discrete acts of emotional expression as well as the tendency to be more emotionally expressive can improve social relationships.

### Emotional Expression and Masculinity in the Social Context

Despite the compelling evidence for social benefits of emotional expression, little attention has been given to distinguishing between different situational and cultural contexts in which the emotional expression occurs. More specifically, research on the benefits of emotional expression has disregarded the fact that some groups may place less value on emotional expressivity than others, and thus may experience different outcomes. For instance, decades of research on men and masculinity have suggested that society places higher demands on males than females to adhere to norms of emotional control (e.g., Mahalik et al., 2003) and restrictive emotionality (e.g., Snell, 1989), and when research distinguishes between emotional experience and emotional expressivity, results suggest that gender stereotypes are stronger for expressivity than for experience (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000).

Theory and research suggest that men who are less emotionally expressive may be perceived as less vulnerable and thus may more closely meet society's expectations for ideal masculine behavior. These gender stereotypes regarding emotional expression take the form of "display rules," or norms regarding how, when, and where emotional expression should occur in males and females, and violating these norms results in negative social consequences (Brody & Hall, 2008). Adolescent males are particularly prone to perceiving negative social appraisal in response to a lack of emotional control, and this perception is especially salient when the judgment is coming from other adolescent males (Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Way, 2011).

Considering this research on masculinity in light of the benefits of emotional expression reviewed previously, it is plausible that in some contexts, emotional expressivity may have negative social consequences at odds with the findings reported in the literature. Indeed, it is possible that what would be maximally adaptive for adolescent males is the flexibility to notice which contexts may require the deployment of emotional control, or "playing it cool," and which contexts may allow for emotional expression and vulnerability with trusted others.

Although it is possible (and typical) to obtain an individual's self-report of emotional expressivity across all situations, we expect that individuals can report variability in expressivity if prompted with different salient contexts. Specifically, we expect that individuals will generally report more expression of emotion when in the company of trusted friends than when in the company of *nonfriends* (defined here as acquaintances and strangers) and that there will be individual differences in the degree to which expressivity depends on context.

By accounting for the different degrees to which an individual may express emotion to close friends compared with nonfriends, we hypothesize that the relationship between emotional expressivity and social adjustment for boys will depend on the social context. We predict that boys who are flexible enough to moderate their emotional expression based on the strength of their relationship with their sharing partner (e.g., a good friend vs. a casual acquaintance or stranger) will report better social adjustment compared with those who exhibit the same degree of emotional expression irrespective of the social context.

Although this theory of expressive flexibility has not yet been tested empirically, it is consistent with existing research on emotional display rules that guide individuals on how particular emotions should be expressed in particular situations (Matsumoto, 1990; Matsumoto, Yoo, Hirayama, & Petrova, 2005). Moreover, indirect support for this theory comes from research that has found that overadherence to masculine norms more generally can be problematic, and that it is behavioral adaptability, or the ability to change one's behaviors dependent on one's environment, that is associated with positive adjustment (e.g., Pleck, 1995). More broadly, this concept is consistent with studies that have found a positive relationship between gender role flexibility (sometimes referred to as *androgyny*) and psychological adjustment in both sexes (e.g., Burchardt & Serbin, 1982).

### The Current Study

In this research study, we examine the relationship between emotional expressivity and social adjustment in adolescent males.

Adolescents participated jointly with a close male friend; each of the two boys provided information on the degree to which he expresses emotion in two contexts: with friends and with non-friends (acquaintances and strangers). Expressivity constructs were analyzed for their association with various measures of social adjustment, controlling for adherence to masculine norms more generally. There has been limited research on emotional expressivity with adolescent participants, despite the fact that the peer group becomes increasingly important during adolescence (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966), and same-sex peers typically comprise the primary support network during adolescence (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). This research will therefore answer some compelling questions regarding adolescent male-male relationships. Because we believe that it is a gendered process that influences the moderation of the relationship between emotional expressivity and social adjustment by degree of relationship with the recipient of the emotion, we studied this relationship in a single-sex sample. Future research will need to test the hypothesized associations in other populations, including females, to explore the degree to which this phenomenon is particular to males and related to masculine norms.

Our specific hypotheses were the following: First, consistent with past research on the benefits of dispositional emotional expressivity in other populations, we predicted that more emotional expressivity with friends would predict better social adjustment (less loneliness, better friendship quality, and a larger social network). In contrast, consistent with research on display rules and masculinity, we predicted that the degree of emotional expressivity with nonfriends would not be associated with social adjustment. Second, taking into account prior research on emotional expressivity as well as prior research on masculine norms, we predicted that *expressive flexibility* (defined as more emotional expressivity when around friends than when around nonfriends) would be associated with better social adjustment in this sample of adolescent males.

## Method

**Participants.** The participants in this study were 178 male high school students, participating in 89 friendship pairs. The participants all attended a high school serving a middle- and low-income, racially diverse population in a mid-sized New England city. Participants were in 10th grade (41%), 11th grade (31%), and 12th grade (28%). The mean age of the sample was 16.8 ( $SD = 1.1$ , range = 13.1 to 20.0). The sample was moderately ethnically diverse (21.5% African American, African, or Black; 12.8% Asian American, Asian, or Indian, 24.8% European American or European, 36.8% Latino, and 4.0% multiracial), and 46% of participants reported that the primary language spoken in their home was something other than English, with the most frequent alternate language reported to be Spanish (22% of total sample). All research described herein was approved by the relevant human subjects review boards of the university and local public school system.

**Recruitment.** A letter describing the research and a passive consent form were distributed to the guardians of all male students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades at the participating high school, and the Principal of the school sent a recorded phone message to the homes of these students, informing guardians of the nature of the

research study, asking them to review the consent form, and providing contact information of the research team. Six parents declined permission for their sons' participation.

Participant recruitment occurred in two phases. In the screening phase, members of the research team distributed an assent form and Short Screening Questionnaire to males in 10th through 12th grades during their lunch periods ( $N = 338$ ). The purpose of the screening phase was to collect contact information for those willing to participate in the larger study, and also to identify close male friends who would be eligible to participate with each recruited participant. The screening questionnaire included a brief demographic survey and asked students to write the names of up to three close male friends who attended 10th through 12th grade at the same high school. Students who completed this screening questionnaire received a small snack for their participation. On the consent form for the screening phase, students were asked to opt in or opt out of being contacted by phone for the larger study.

Two hundred fifty-eight boys of the 338 identified in the screening phase (76.3%) agreed to be contacted for the larger study. Members of the research team called each student who opted in, described the study to each student contacted, and told him that participation required that he bring in one of the friends that he listed on the screening questionnaire on the day of his participation. Of the 258 boys that opted in during recruitment, 154 (59.7%) were eventually reached directly by a researcher or were recruited to participate as a friend by another participant (the remaining 24 participants of the total 178 were recruited to participate as a friend but had not been captured in the initial screening sample).

**Assent procedure and compensation.** Friend pairs attended a research appointment at their school during a free period of the school day or after school. When participants arrived for their appointment, a research team member described the study to participants, provided an assent form, and told participants that they could withdraw from the study with no negative consequences. No participants withdrew from the study during this assent procedure. Participants each received a restaurant gift card or movie ticket for their participation. In addition, at the conclusion of the study, four participating students were randomly selected to receive a \$25 gift card to the store of their choice.

**Measures.** After providing assent, participants completed a number of questionnaires designed to measure demographic characteristics and the constructs described subsequently. Each participant completed all measures silently in a room with his coparticipant and a researcher present. Participants were not permitted to discuss responses to the measures.

**Emotional expressivity.** The Emotional Expressivity Scale (Kring et al., 1994) is a 17-item measure of the degree to which an individual communicates his emotional experience to others, verbally and nonverbally. A sample item is, "I can't hide how I am feeling." The intention of this measure is to assess the expression of emotion, separate from the experience or the interpretation of that emotion. Items are rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 6 (*always true*). To better address identified hypotheses, we revised the Emotion Expressivity Scale to assess emotional expressivity first when the participant was with "very close friends" (referred to as *friends* in this article) and then when the participant is with "people that you don't know very well" (referred to as *nonfriends* in this article). Revision to the measure included revision to the instructions and to the individual items.



The two versions of this questionnaire were presented separately to the participants; participants completed the measure twice, once while considering their behavior with friends and then with non-friends. For example, the version inquiring about friends instructed the participant to “answer the following questions based on how you show your emotions to *very close friends*,” and an item was “I can’t hide the way I am feeling from my close friends,” whereas the version inquiring about nonfriends instructed the participant to “answer the following questions based on how you show your emotions to people that you *don’t* know very well, like teachers, neighbors, and classmates who aren’t your friends,” and an item was “I can’t hide the way I am feeling from people I don’t know well.” In this study, internal reliabilities of the modified measures ranged from .79 to .86.

**Expressive flexibility.** We calculated flexibility as the difference between self-reported expressivity with friends and expressivity with nonfriends. This permitted us to examine expressive flexibility as a dimensional construct, and had the advantage of including all participants in relevant analyses. This approach has been used before in the emotion regulation literature, with coping flexibility being derived by computing the discrepancy of various strategy use across different contexts (Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014). Scores on this composite measure ranged from  $-10$  to  $46$  with higher scores indicating high emotion expressivity with friends and low emotion expressivity with nonfriends. In order to account for the fact that some individuals with the same difference score might have generally high expressivity whereas others might have generally low expressivity, and to avoid positive correlations due to overall higher expressivity, we controlled for the average of each participant’s expressivity across friends and nonfriends in relevant analyses.

**Friendship quality.** The Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman, 1996) is a 43-item measure of social support and negative interactions between the respondent and a particular friend, identified here as the coparticipant in this research study. Sample items include, “How much do you protect and look out for this person,” and “How much does this person say mean or harsh things to you?” The Network of Relationships Inventory has been used extensively with good to excellent reliability (e.g., Buhrmester, 1990; Gavin & Furman, 1996; Way & Chen, 2000; Way & Greene, 2006). In this study, the subscales of Friendship Satisfaction, Support, and Intimacy were examined, as well as the index score for Total Social Support, which is a sum of the Companionship, Instrumental Aid, Intimacy, Nurturance, Affection, Admiration, Reliable Alliance, Satisfaction, and Support subscales. Here, subscale reliabilities ranged from  $\alpha = .84$  to  $.87$ , and reliability for the index score was  $\alpha = .95$ .

**Size of social network.** The Social Support Questionnaire, Short Revision (Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987) is a measure of the breadth of social support in an individual’s social network. There are 6 items on this measure, and a sample item is, “Whom can you really count on to care about you, regardless of what is happening to you?” For each item, the participant selects either “No one,” or writes the initials and relationship of up to 9 individuals (e.g., “BA, best friend”). Internal reliability for breadth of social support network (number of individuals providing support) was  $\alpha = .93$ .

**Loneliness.** The UCLA Loneliness Scale, Version 3 (UCLA-3; Russell, 1996) is a 20-item self-report measure of an individual’s

perceived loneliness. A sample item is, “How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?” Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*), and a scale score is calculated as the sum of all items. Although measures of loneliness have been found to be associated with other measures of socioemotional adjustment such as social support, analyses presented by Russell (1996) support the discriminant validity of this scale against social support, depression, and self-esteem. Internal reliability in this study was  $.87$ .

**Adherence to masculine norms.** The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory, Short Form (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) is a self-report questionnaire that measures conformity to masculine norms common in dominant U.S. society, and the items in each dimension reflect behaviors, feelings, and thoughts consistent with the norms relevant to each subscale. The CMNI is a 55-item inventory whose 11 factors are labeled *importance of winning*, *emotional control*, *risk taking*, *condoning violence*, *power over women*, *dominance*, *playboy*, *self-reliance*, *primacy of work*, *disdain for homosexuality*, and *pursuit of status*. Because of the restrictions for research in this particular school system, we removed the Playboy and Disdain for Homosexuality subscales from the measure. Items from this measure are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), and example items included, “I am comfortable trying to get my way” and “I hate any kind of risk” (reverse scored). Total CMNI score is calculated by summing the responses to all items. A high score indicates high conformity to masculine norms. Internal reliability of the total CMNI score is  $.94$  (Mahalik et al., 2003). Because we hypothesize that low emotional expressivity is related to masculinity, we controlled for total CMNI score in analyses in this study, to ensure that relationships between emotional expressivity and adjustment are not overestimated due to known relationships between adjustment and masculine norms more generally. (There were no notable differences in results when performed with and without controlling for total CMNI score.)

**Statistical procedures.** To account for the fact that we collected data from individuals nested within friendship pairs, and the likelihood that boys within a friendship are more alike than boys across friendships, we conducted the majority of our analyses using hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). As others have noted, hierarchical linear modeling accounts for the nonindependence of data that emerges when data are collected within units such as friendship pairs (Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995). Both hierarchical linear modeling and multilevel structural equation modeling are commonly used to analyze nested data and simulation studies have shown that both approaches capture the nonindependence of observations within dyads, allow for measurement error within individuals, and produce nearly identical results and conclusions (Wendorf, 2002). All analyses were conducted using the PROC Mixed module of SAS and examined the relationships among emotion expressivity and social adjustment (e.g., loneliness, friendship quality, and social networks size). The individual-level data obtained from each boy in each friendship pair were nested to form dyad data. Our analytic strategy consisted of identifying and evaluating basic models of the relationship between emotion expressivity and social adjustment. For our first model, variation in self-reported emotion

expressivity with friends was modeled at Level 1, which can be represented by equation 1:

$$\text{Loneliness} = \beta_{0i} + \beta_{1i}(\text{self-reported emotion expressivity with friends}) + e_{ij}$$

This equation indicates that loneliness for male *i* in dyad *j* is a function of the intercept for each person ( $\beta_{0i}$ ) and the linear relationship between self-reported expressivity with friends for each person ( $\beta_{1i}$ ). In this model, we predicted the value of the dependent variable (loneliness) for a given dyad from an average level term ( $\beta_0$ , the intercept that varies across individuals and is thus a random coefficient); the value of self-reported emotion expressivity with friends (the coefficient  $\beta_1$  represents a fixed effect, essentially the average within-person slope across boys); and an error term ( $e_{ij}$ ) that reflects how much each boy's average deviates from the overall average. These Level 1 equations specify the links between variables at the individual level and yield slope and intercept coefficients to index these relationships (e.g., Do target boys report less loneliness when they also endorse being highly emotional expressive with their friends?)

In a second step, the model was fit with the independent variable (self-reported emotion expressivity with friends) set as a random coefficient, that is, it was allowed to vary across individuals. This would be represented by the following Level 2 equation:

$$\beta_{0i} = \gamma_{00} + r_{0i}; \beta_{1i} = \gamma_{10} + r_{1i}$$

These Level 2 equations specify the relation between these within-person coefficients and between-person variables (e.g., Is the relationship between emotion expressivity and loneliness stronger for target boys? Are the Level 1 slopes smaller for target boys as compared with the friend?) Subsequent models were then compared each with the previous models to determine if the additional complexity resulted in an improved goodness-of-fit. To make these comparisons, we created all models using REML estimation. Within two nested models, the difference between the  $-2$  res log likelihood provides a chi-square test of improvement of the model fit, distributed on degrees-of-freedom defined by the difference in free parameters between the two models (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In all models, we centered all predictor variables around the grand mean prior to including them in the model.

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Variables of Interest*

Domain	Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social adjustment	UCLA-3 Loneliness total	178	37.16	8.89
	NRI Social Support total	170	3.17	.70
	SSQSR breadth	163	24.96	12.42
Emotional expressivity	EES with friend	172	64.52	13.80
	EES with nonfriend	170	47.17	11.72
	Emotion flexibility	165	17.79	12.03

*Note.* UCLA-3 Loneliness = UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3); NRI = The Network of Relationship Inventory; SSQSR = The Social Support Questionnaire, Short Revision; EES = Emotional Expressivity Scale.

## Results

**Preliminary analyses.** Descriptive statistics for variables of interest are provided in Table 1. As expected, participants reported more emotional expressivity with friends than with nonfriends. Self-reported expressivity with friends and expressivity with nonfriends were strongly correlated ( $r = .59, p < .001$ ). Analyses of variance were used to analyze the associations between demographic variables and the variables of interest, to determine whether any demographic variables should be controlled in remaining analyses. Our preliminary analyses indicated that grade significantly predicted self-report of expressivity with nonfriends (with 12th graders reporting less expressivity than both 10th and 11th graders),  $F(2, 165) = 3.36, p < .05$ . Grade also significantly predicted total social support (with 12th graders reporting significantly less social support than both 10th and 11th graders),  $F(2, 165) = 3.54, p < .05$ . Neither race nor free or reduced-price lunch status (a proxy for family income) was associated with any of the adjustment variables of interest. Thus, we controlled for grade, but not race or lunch status, in the remainder of the analyses.

*Hypothesis 1:* More emotional expressivity with friends, but not with nonfriends, will predict better social adjustment.

We conducted several hierarchical linear model analyses in order to examine the relationship between emotion expressivity with friends and three measures of social adjustment (i.e., loneliness, social support, and friendship quality). Results indicated that after controlling for grade and conformity to masculine norms, greater emotion expressivity with friends was significantly associated with lower scores on the UCLA-3 Loneliness Scale,  $t(70) = -4.26, p < .0001$ ; best-fitting model was the null model and higher friendship quality with the coparticipant,  $t(71) = 4.39, p < .0001$ ; best fitting model allowed both the intercept and self-reported emotion expressivity with friends to vary randomly  $\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 46.11, p < .0001$ . Self-reported emotion expressivity with friends was not significantly associated with social network size,  $t(63) = 1.79, p = ns$ ; best-fitting model was the null model. We next conducted several hierarchical linear model analyses in order to examine the relationship between emotion expressivity around nonfriends and social adjustment. In contrast to findings on emotional expressivity with friends, emotion expressivity with nonfriends was not significantly related to loneliness,  $t(70) = -1.77, p = ns$ ; best fitting model was the null model, friendship quality,  $t(70) = -.15, ns$ ; best fitting model was the null model or social support network size,  $t(64) = 1.39, ns$ ; best fitting model was the null model. Results are summarized in Table 2. These findings provide some support for Hypothesis 1 in that greater expressivity with friends was associated with improvement in two of three social adjustment variables, whereas greater expressivity with nonfriends was not associated with social adjustment.

*Hypothesis 2:* Expressive flexibility (defined as more emotional expressivity when around friends than when around nonfriends) will be associated with better social adjustment.

We conducted several hierarchical linear model analyses to examine the relationship between the dimensional measure of expressive flexibility and the social adjustment variables, controlling for grade, average of each participant's expressivity across

Table 2  
HLM Estimated Coefficients

Factor	Loneliness			Friendship quality			Network size		
	$\beta$ Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i>	$\beta$ Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i>	$\beta$ Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i>
Intercept	38.53	1.17	32.983**	3.01	.09	31.834**	27.75	1.88	12.10
Grade 10	-2.87	1.57	-1.83	.30	.11	2.64*	3.89	2.52	1.54
Grade 11	-.73	1.65	-.44	.07	.11	.61	2.71	2.63	1.03
Grade 12	0	—	—	0	—	—	0	—	—
Adherence to masculine norms	-.05	.06	-.88	.01	.00	1.62	.09	.09	1.00
Self-reported emotion expressivity with friends	-.20	.05	-4.26**	.01	.00	4.39**	.14	.08	1.79
Intercept	38.54	1.23	31.22**	3.01	.10	29.25**	22.97	1.91	12.03
Grade 10	-2.70	1.67	-1.61	.29	.13	2.28*	3.56	2.57	1.39
Grade 11	-.96	1.73	-.56	.13	.12	1.08	2.54	2.63	.97
Grade 12	0	—	—	0	—	—	0	—	—
Adherence to masculine norms	-.08	.06	-1.28	.01	.00	1.84	.12	.09	1.28
Self-reported emotion expressivity with nonfriends	-.11	.06	-1.77	-.00	.00	-.15	.13	.09	1.39

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

friends and nonfriends, and conformity to masculine norms. Greater expressive flexibility was significantly associated with lower scores on the UCLA-3 Loneliness scale,  $t(66) = -2.02$ ,  $p < .05$  (the best-fitting model was the null model) and higher friendship quality,  $t(66) = 3.47$ ,  $p < .001$  (the best-fitting model was the null model). Emotion flexibility was not significantly associated with social network size,  $t(60) = 0.35$ ,  $p = ns$ . In sum, results indicate that greater expressive flexibility is associated with less loneliness and better friendship quality.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the construct of emotional expressivity in different social contexts in a sample of adolescent males. Although prior research has shown broad benefits of emotional expressivity across many different populations, the strength of the relationship between the individual who is expressing and the recipient of that expression has not been taken into account. Additionally, research and theory on social norms for high emotional control in males leads us to question whether emotional expressivity would be unequivocally beneficial for adolescent boys, or whether it might vary by relationship strength. This is the first study to distinguish between expressivity when around friends and expressivity when around others such as acquaintances and strangers (here, nonfriends), and results supported the utility of this distinction. The relationship between expressivity in these two contexts was strong, suggesting that that an individual's tendency to express emotion is generally stable, but not so strong to suggest that an individual does not discriminate between different audiences in choosing the degree to which he will express emotion.

Boys' expressivity with friends and expressivity with nonfriends were differentially associated with outcome variables, in that greater expressivity with friends was associated with more social support and less loneliness, whereas greater expressivity with nonfriends was not associated with social adjustment. Thus, it appears that it is only within the context of friendship that emotional expressivity has benefits among adolescent boys. This is

consistent with Pennebaker's (2003) and Rimé's (2007) theories on social integration and social sharing of emotion; boys who express more emotion to a friend allow more opportunities to receive social support and increase the social bond with this friend, ultimately increasing social support and decreasing loneliness. On the other hand, boys who express more emotion to individuals who are not close friends are unlikely to receive social support in return and will not benefit from an increased bond, therefore are unlikely to experience and report improved social wellbeing. Interestingly, degree of emotional expressivity to neither friends nor nonfriends was associated with size of social network, suggesting that perhaps it is only the quality, rather than the quantity, of friendships that are affected by amount of expressivity.

Despite being consistent with prior work on social sharing and social integration, at first glance, these results are inconsistent with prior research on masculine norms and display rules, which might predict that boys who adhere most closely to masculine norms for emotional self-control (i.e., low emotional expressivity), particularly when with individuals that are not trusted friends, would reap social benefits of this adherence. One wonders whether there truly is no benefit, as indicated by these results, or whether emotionally controlled boys experience other benefits not measured here, such as to their self-esteem or to their social reputation.

The fact that emotional expressivity in the presence of nonfriends provided no additional benefit to adolescent boys is also inconsistent with early research on discrete events of emotional disclosure in which participants in a laboratory experienced benefits after disclosing to interviewers, coparticipants, or even a tape recorder (e.g., Pennebaker, 2003), each of which could be categorized as a *nonfriend* by our definition. This could indicate that there were affected outcomes that were not measured in this study, or it may indicate that there are different mechanisms for benefits of discrete disclosure as compared with dispositional emotional expressivity. This provides an area in need of further exploration.

Another aim of the present research was to explore the notion of expressive flexibility in this sample of adolescent boys; that is, the tendency to express more emotion when with friends than when

with nonfriends. We hypothesized that it would be better for boys to express emotion with friends but to suppress emotion with acquaintances and strangers; results indicate that greater expressive flexibility is indeed associated with less loneliness and better friendship quality. The importance of this finding for boys and men could be great, particularly for those who experience significant emotional pain but who live in environments where prevailing masculinity norms constrain its expression. If boys can adjust their affective presentation depending on their social context, they can maximize the benefits described in the emotional expression and masculinity literatures, and minimize poor outcomes, including suicide, that may be associated with unilateral emotion suppression (e.g., Cleary, 2012). Additionally, this research suggests that interventions seeking to increase the social wellbeing of adolescent boys could aim to increase disclosure with a few trusted friends, rather than increase emotional expressivity more generally. This may be a more tenable goal for boys with many barriers to emotional expression. Further research should explore the relationships between boys' knowledge of/adherence to masculine norms for emotional control and expressivity between friends, as well as the extent to which boys can control the expression/suppression discussed here (see Wester, Heesacker, & Snowden, 2016, for more on the need to integrate the largely separate masculinity and emotion literatures).

The current study expands our knowledge about the complexity of emotional expressivity in adolescent males. However, there are a number of factors that limit our ability to draw firm conclusions, and these factors guide future research in this area. First, although we can draw inferences regarding the direction of the relationships between the variables studied here (e.g., emotional expressivity impacts adjustment), it is impossible to conclude direction of the effect from these correlational data. For example, it may be that the relationship between emotional expressivity and adjustment is bidirectional, in that more expressivity leads to better friendship quality and less loneliness, which in turn drives opportunities and willingness to be more emotionally expressive. Second, as with most novel psychological research findings, it is unclear the degree to which these results might be affected by sample characteristics. It is not yet clear whether the distinction between expressing to friends versus nonfriends is only true for males, or adolescents, or whether results would be generalized to a broader population. Further research should attempt to replicate this research in girls, and across a broader age range, in order to better understand the phenomenon. Also, though diverse, our sample was urban and of moderately low socioeconomic status. It could be the case that this effect would be strongest in a low-income urban environment in which norms dictate an invulnerable façade for self-protection (see Way & Chen, 2000); therefore, empirical examination of this relationship in samples of different geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds is necessary in order to explore the extent to which this distinction is relevant to other samples. Third, these findings were based only on self-report data. Though others' reporting on an individual's emotional experience could be considered flawed and/or incomplete for other reasons, it is worth mentioning that leaders in our field continue to stress the need to move beyond self-report measures in general (Wong & Horn, 2016) and particularly in the case of men and emotions (Wester et al., 2016).

Despite these interesting findings, many questions remain and will guide future research. For instance, research suggests that

emotional regulation is a complex, multistep process (e.g., Gross & John, 2003). The current research operates from an assumption that boys who are low in expressivity are actively suppressing an emotional response, either consciously or unconsciously, by inhibiting or manipulating the expressive response to an experienced emotion. Gross and John (2003) report that a person may choose to use suppression as a method of emotional regulation when in the company of nonfriends or when in the company of those that may not approve of this display of emotion. However, frequent suppression is only one possible reason that an individual may have low emotional expressivity, with other common reasons being alexithymia or cognitive reappraisal earlier in the emotion regulation process that results in reduced emotional experience. Future research might address the question of at what point in the emotion regulation process the norms for emotional control act on an individual boy's reaction to an emotional event.

A second area in need of further exploration is the way in which individuals' racial/cultural and contextual norms might interact with adherence to masculine norms to predict expressivity with friends and nonfriends. Research suggests that culture and social context influences a person's situation selection, attention, situation modification, appraisal, and behavior related to an emotional event (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). In this sample, an individual who exhibited low emotional expressivity may have done so because he believes that is how men are expected to behave, because he believes he needs to behave that way to protect himself in an urban environment, because he believes that is what is expected of someone of his cultural background, or some combination of these factors. Future research should attempt to better differentiate between these factors by exploring participants' ideas about what people in their in-group (e.g., males, urban males, Latino urban males) should do, rather than just what they do.

Related to this, although we hypothesize that the findings of this study are relevant to boys because emotional expressivity is relevant to masculine norms, the next step to understand whether masculinity is indeed relevant will be to test whether the effects seen here are moderated by masculinity constructs. However, in doing so, future studies in this area will need to carefully differentiate between masculine behavior (i.e., adhering to masculine norms, one of which is the norm for emotional control; Mahalik et al., 2003) and masculine ideologies. The former would be expected to be prone to issues of multicollinearity with a measure of emotional expressivity, whereas the latter would be a more appropriate construct with which to answer this complicated question.

In sum, this research extends our understanding of emotional expressivity by examining the difference between expressivity when with friends versus nonfriends, and by exploring these constructs in adolescent boys. Despite some limitations, these results increase our understanding of emotional expressivity in adolescent boys and provide information to suggest that social context is an important moderator of the relationship between emotional expressivity and social outcomes. Results support recent theories on social integration as the mechanism for benefits to wellbeing that have been observed related to emotional disclosure and emotional expressivity. In addition, results suggest that adolescent boys who are not generally emotionally expressive may still have positive social outcomes if they can be emotionally expressive within their close friendships. Future research should explore whether there are other particular environmental, demographic, or interpersonal fac-



tors that moderate the relationship between flexibility and adjustment in adolescent boys. A better understanding of the contributing factors and outcomes related to emotional expressivity and flexibility in this population will increase our ability to maximize the use of informal supports as boys continue to navigate their social environment.

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