

The Association between Depressive Symptoms and Listening with Curiosity: The Mediating Role of Adherence to Norms of Masculinity among Early Adolescents

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BACKGROUND

- Depressive symptoms in early adolescence is an urgent issue of our time. More than 1 in 3 teenagers reported persistent feelings of sadness in 2019, a 40% increase since 2009 (CDC, 2020).
- Depressive symptoms are widely studied among youth, primarily in terms of associations with gender-typed behaviors such as adhering to ideological beliefs about masculinity (e.g., “boys should be tough, competitive, and maintain their social status”; Pleck, 1983, 2003) and peer relationship problems (Rudolph et al., 1994).
- Although listening with curiosity – the ability to ask questions that solicit descriptions of others’ inner and outer experiences– is proposed to be an especially important and negative correlate of depressive symptoms (Engel, 2015; Rodrigue et al., 1987), such a construct has received less empirical attention (Way et al., 2018). Therefore, there are research gaps in explaining the link.

Purpose of the study

- We used the relational-cultural theory (RCT; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022) – healthy masculinity necessitates actively fostering human connection and directly challenging hegemonic norms that valorize hyper-independence and invulnerability – as a conceptual framework through which we investigated the role of adherence to norms of masculinity as a mediator between depressive symptoms and listening with curiosity (see Figure 1).
- Adherence to masculinity norms, which emphasize self-reliance, toughness, and emotional control, may disrupt the psychological benefits of listening with curiosity (Mahalik & Cournoyer, 2000).
- Considering that gender plays a significant role in adolescent depressive symptoms and gender-typed behaviors (Gupta et al., 2013), we also explored the moderating role of gender on the indirect association of depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity through adherence to norms of masculinity.

METHOD

Participants

- 451 seventh-grade students in seven public middle schools in New York City ($M_{age}=12.52$; 48% female).
- The sample was racially/ethnically diverse: Asian (36%), White (29%), Latino/a (16%), African American (13%), and Other (6%).

Procedure

- This study used the baseline student data from an observational study of the Listening Project (LP), a NYC school-based intervention designed to foster greater human connection, listening with curiosity, and social-emotional skills and well-being among students, teachers, and families.
- The response rate was 65%: 451 of 697 students and their parents assented and consented to participate in the evaluation of the Listening Project.
- The student survey was administered through Qualtrics Online Survey Software.

Measures

- Depressive Symptoms-Short (Kovacs, 1992)
- Adherence to Norms of Masculinity – adapted from the Gender-Typed Behaviors in Relationships Scale (Gupta et al., 2013; Chu, 2005)
- Listening with Curiosity – adapted from the Listening Competency Scale (Ford et al., 2000)
- Friendship Quality (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)

Statistical Analysis

- A combination of PROCESS Models 8, 6, and 85 was performed in SPSS v.27.
- Bootstrapping was set at 5000 replications at a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

RESULTS

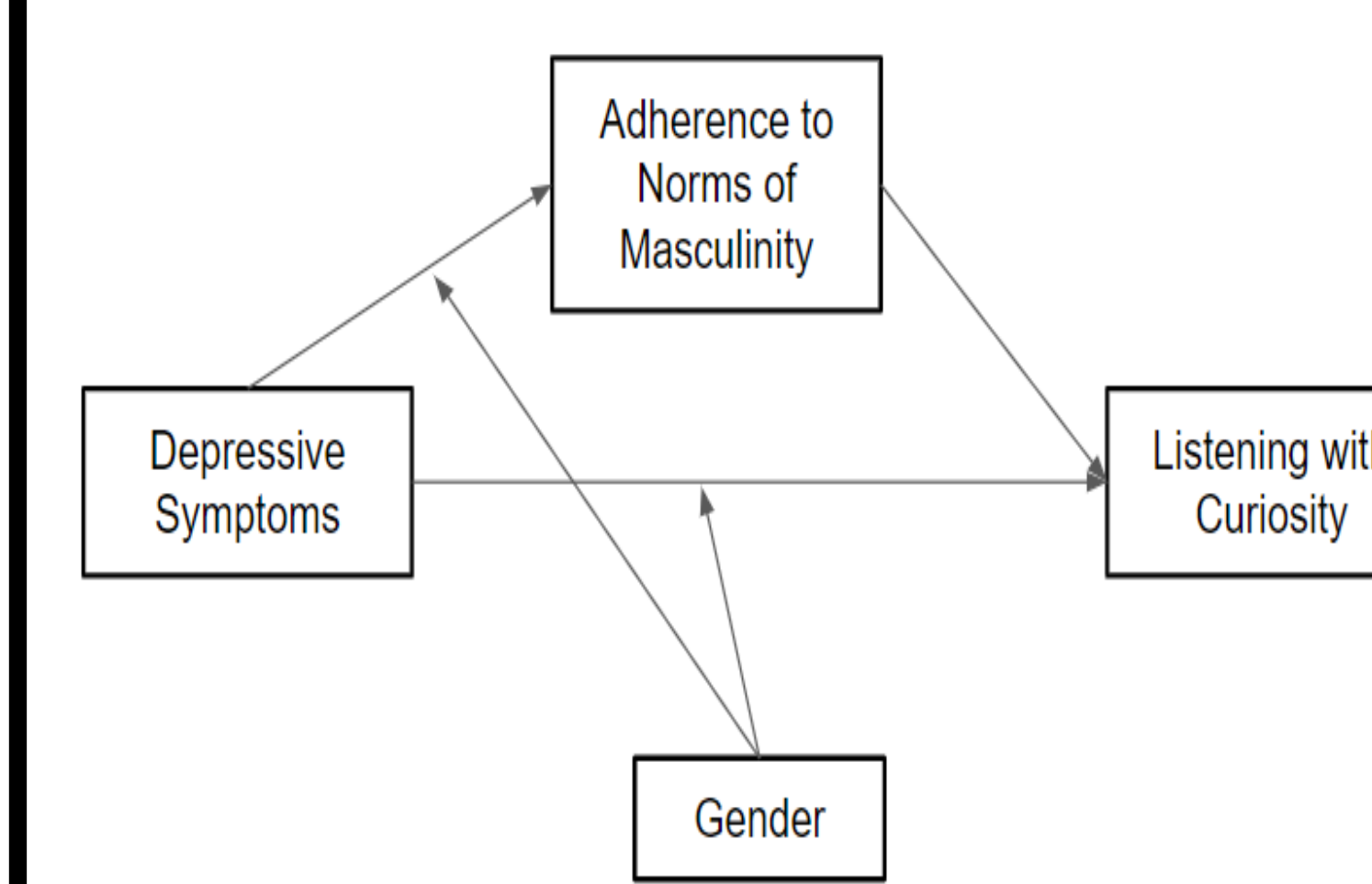


Figure 1. Conceptual moderated mediation model depicting the expected pathways for the moderating role of gender on the indirect effect of depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity through adherence to norms of masculinity.

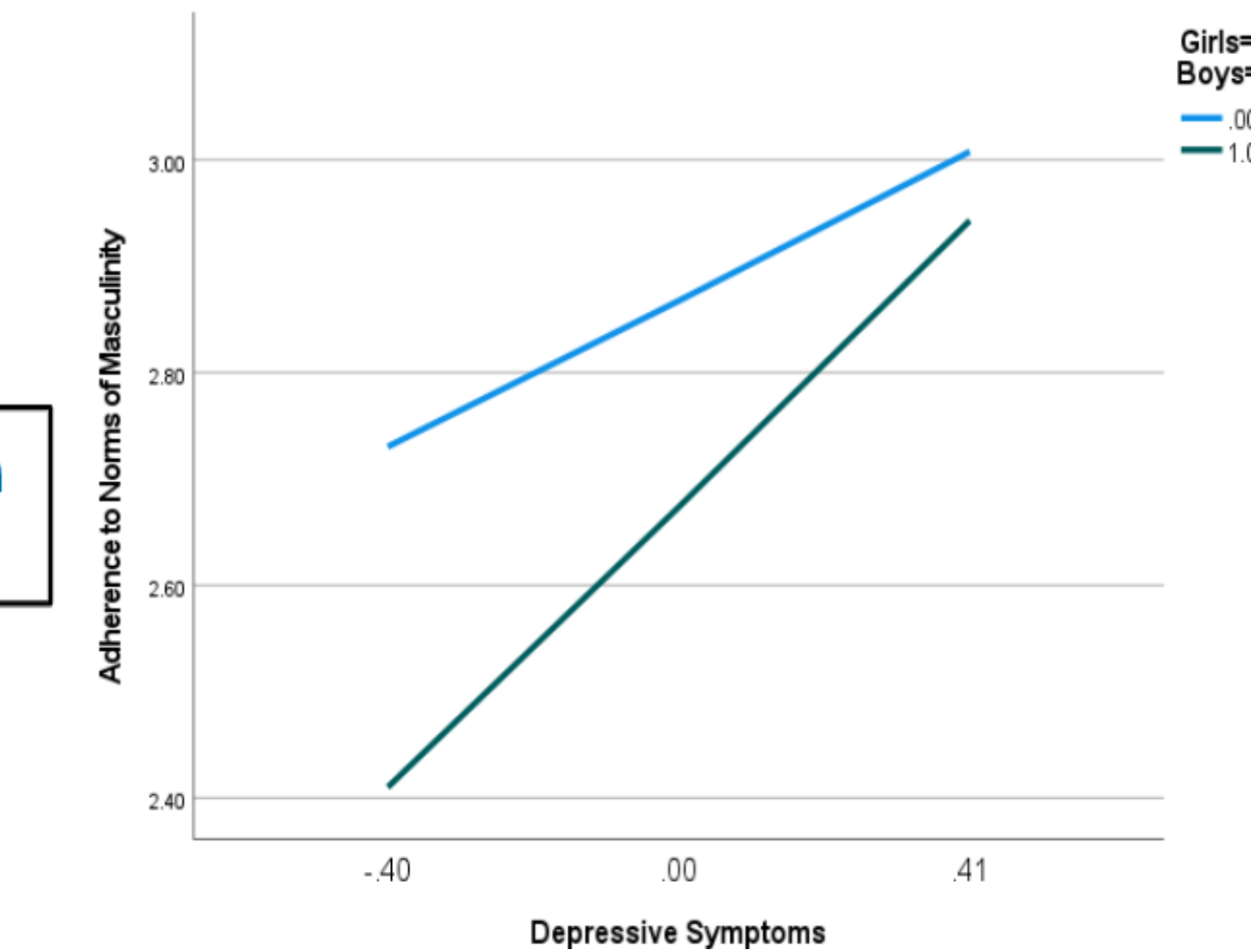


Figure 2. Simple slope test of the interaction between gender X depressive symptoms on adherence to norms of masculinity. Depressive symptoms were reported at high (i.e., 1 SD above the mean) and low (i.e., 1 SD below the mean) values. Both slopes are significant at $p < .05$.

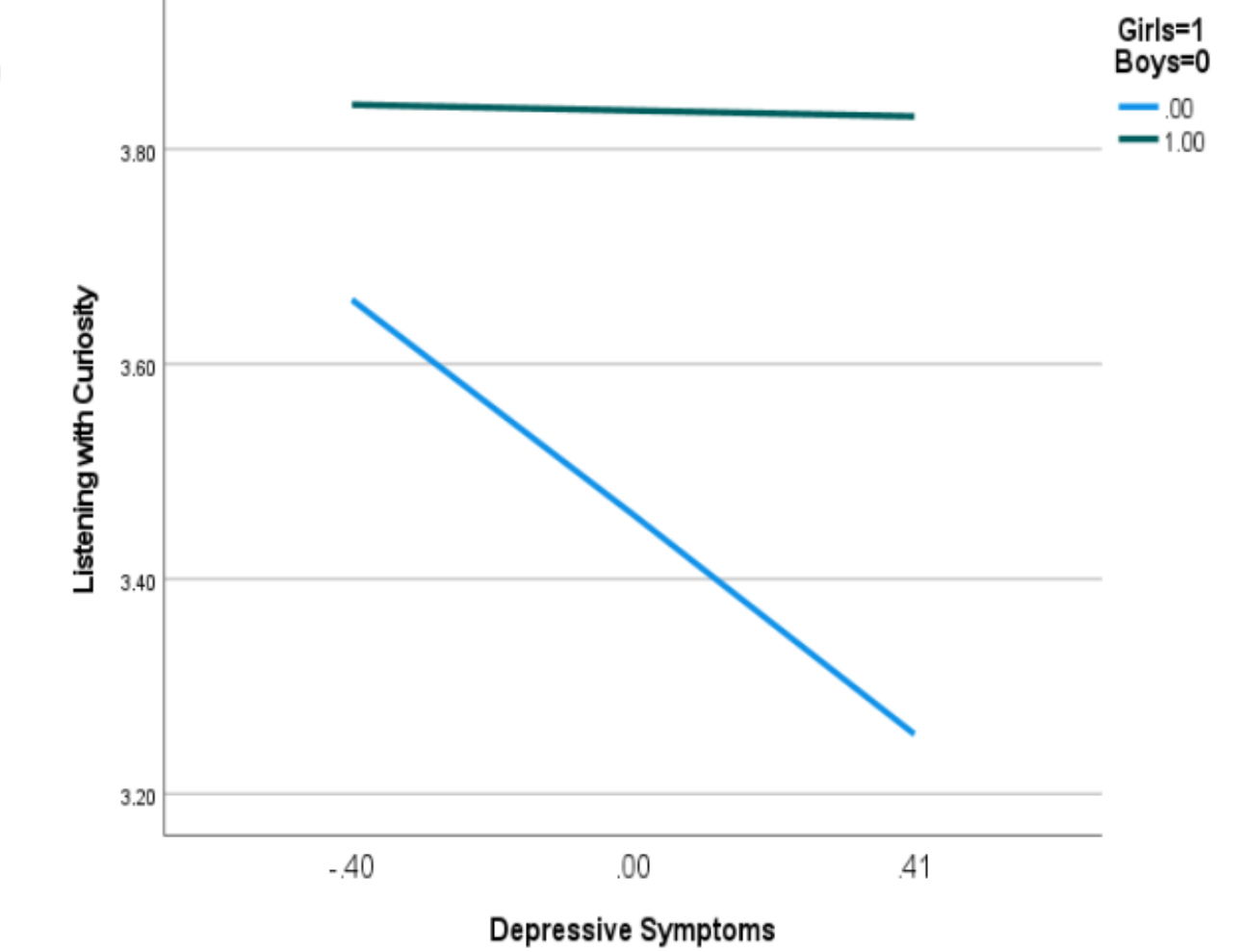


Figure 3. Simple slope test of the interaction between gender X depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity. Depressive symptoms were reported at high (i.e., 1 SD above the mean) and low (i.e., 1 SD below the mean) values. The slope was significant at $p < .05$ for boys, but not for girls.

Main findings

1. Gender significantly moderated the indirect association of depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity through adherence to norms of masculinity (index of moderated mediation, $B=-0.11$, $SE=0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.22, -0.00]).
2. This conditional indirect effect was stronger for boys, $B=-0.12$, $SE=0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.23, -0.04] than girls, $B=-0.22$, $SE=0.06$, 95% CI = [-0.35, -0.12].
3. The simple slopes analyses revealed that the association between depressive symptoms and adherence to norms of masculinity was stronger for girls than for boys (see Figure 2).
4. The simple slopes analyses revealed that the association between depressive symptoms and listening with curiosity was significant for boys but not for girls (see Figure 3).

Ad-hoc analysis: Studies have suggested that supportive friendship may mitigate the negative effects of adherence to norms of masculinity on social and emotional well-being (Way, 2011, 2014). We further examined a moderated serial mediation model in which adherence to norms of masculinity and friendship quality as serial mediators and gender as a moderator in the relationship between depressive symptoms and listening with curiosity.

1. Findings revealed that there was a significant indirect association of depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity through adherence to norms of masculinity and friendship quality, $B=-0.03$, $SE=0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.06, -0.01].
2. However, the index of moderated mediation was non-significant; thus, the indirect association of depressive symptoms on listening with curiosity through adherence to norms of masculinity and friendship quality did not vary by gender.

DISCUSSION

Findings shed light on the potential contribution depressive symptoms to early adolescents’ ability to listen via question-asking behavior through two indirect paths, with gender moderating these relationships.

- Early adolescent girls who are more depressed and self-critical may resist the devalued convention of female goodness and act like boys by adhering to the valued masculine characteristics in North American culture (Gilligan, 1990; Rogers et al., 2019).
- Early adolescent boys may suffer psychologically and socially as a result of conforming to a definition of masculinity that goes against human nature (Chu, 2018; Way, 2011).
- Adherence to norms of masculinity may serve as a risk factor for listening with curiosity for depressive boys. However, having positive friendship quality can buffer boys against depressive symptoms and the negative-associated consequences, suggesting that resistance to norms of masculinity and the relationship needs met by friends may lead to positive outcomes for boys.
- It will be important to replicate the results of this study with a sample of both younger and older adolescents to gain a better understanding of the development of gender differences in the relationship between depressive symptoms and listening with curiosity through gender-typed behaviors and friendship quality.