

# Gender Socialization and Positive Functioning of College Men

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### ABSTRACT

The vast literature on male gender socialization implies a number of negative consequences for men's mental health, which is often defined as a lack of symptom distress. However, this conceptualization of mental health is inconsistent with the positive psychology literature that suggests there is more to life than being symptom free. Rather, mental health should be conceptualized as the presence of well-being and hope. Well-being and hope have a number of implications for physical and mental health, relationships, academic performance, and adaptive coping. Thus, the current study sought to understand the ways in which both conformity to masculine norms (CMN) and gender role conflict (GRC) influence the positive functioning of men by using Ryff's (1989a) psychological well-being theory and Snyder's (1991) hope theory.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout decades of research on the psychology of men, scholars have reported on the abundance of negative outcomes associated with traditional masculine gender roles. Empirical research has established that men who conform to traditional masculine ideology – rooted in hegemony and sexism – can predictably be associated with mental health and behavioral problems (Levant & Richmond, 2016). However, a focus on male pathology may skew these findings because common interpretations of traditional masculinity are largely negative and developed principally on stereotypical masculine behaviors (Hammer & Good, 2010). Therefore, popular measures such as the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory are primarily used in research operating within this deficit model. But perhaps traditional masculinity is not innately correlated with negative outcomes and a paradigm shift is necessary – one focused on strengths and positive psychology. Literature on positive psychology suggests that mental health should be conceptualized as the presence of psychological well-being and hope (Ryff, 1989a; Snyder, 1991).

### Psychological Well-Being

Ryff (1989a) pioneered the study of optimal psychological functioning and developed a model of well-being formulated from theories of philosophy, and humanistic, developmental, and clinical psychology. The integration of these domains are a convergence of indexes that have guided the literature on positive psychological functioning (Ryff, 1989b). Ryff identified six key domains of psychological well-being: 1. Autonomy 2. Environmental Mastery 3. Personal Growth 4. Positive Relations 5. Purpose in Life 6. Self – Acceptance.

### Hope

Snyder (1991) defined hope as a state in which people perceive themselves to have the capability to derive pathways to desired goals and the necessary motivation via agency to use those pathways. The three constructs that comprise Snyder's hope theory are goals, agency, and pathways. Goals are the cognitive component of the theory and represent the targets of mental action sequences (Snyder, 2002). Pathways thinking is generating usable routes to attain goal pursuits. Agency thinking is the motivational component of hope theory, defined as people's perceived capability to use generated pathways to reach their goals.

### METHODS

#### Hypotheses

- H1. Higher conformity to masculine norms, as measured by the CMNI, will be associated with a higher levels of gender role conflict, as measured by the GRCS.
- H2. Higher conformity to masculine norms will be associated with more (2a) trait hope goals, (2b) trait hope agency, (2c) autonomy, (2d) environmental mastery and less (2e) trait hope pathways and (2f) self-acceptance.
- H3. Higher levels of gender role conflict will be associated with less (3a) trait hope goals, (3b) trait hope pathways, (3c) trait hope agency, (3d) autonomy, (3e) environmental mastery, (3f) personal growth, (3g) positive relationships with others, and (3h) self-acceptance.
- H4. Mediating effects of gender role conflict will explain negative relations between conformity to masculine norms and (4a) trait hope goals, (4b) trait hope pathways, and (4c) trait hope agency.

H5. Mediating effects of gender role conflict will explain the relations between conformity to masculine norms and (5a) autonomy, (5b) environmental mastery, (5c) personal growth, (5d) positive relationships with others, and (5f) self-acceptance.

#### Participants

Participants in this study were 366 male students enrolled at a Midwestern university, recruited through an undergraduate psychology research pool and social media. Ages ranged from 18 to 40 years ( $M = 20.24$ ,  $SD = 2.813$ ). Participants self-identified their race as Caucasian (83.6%), Latino (4.6%), African American (4.4%), Asian American (4.4%), bi-racial or multi-racial (2.2%), and "Other" (.8%). The sample was predominantly heterosexual (94.5%), with participants also identifying as gay (2.7%), bisexual (1.1%), and "questioning" or "other" (1.4%).

#### Measures

**Gender Role Conflict Scale** (GRCS; O'Neil et al., 1986) is a 37 item, self-report measure of experienced negative consequences related to socialized masculine gender roles. There are four subscales including: (a) Success, Power, and Competition, (b) Restrictive Emotionality, (c) Restrictive Affectionate Behavior Between Men, and (d) Conflict Between Work and Family Relations.

**Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-46** (CMNI-46; Parent & Moradi, 2009) is a 46 item, self-report measure of men's endorsement of behaviors, feelings, and thoughts related to masculine gender role norms (Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006).

**Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being-54** (SPWB-54; Ryff, n.d.) is a 54 item, self-report measure of psychological well-being. There are six domains: (a) Autonomy, (b) Environmental Mastery, (c) Personal Growth, (d) Positive Relations with Others, (e) Purpose in Life, and (f) Self-Acceptance. Items are scored using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of well-being. The SPWB-54 shows good internal reliability across subscales ( $\alpha = .71$  to  $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Trait Hope Scale-Revised** (HSR; Shorey & Snyder, 2004) is an 18-item, self-report measure that assesses trait levels of three subscales: (a) goals, (b) pathways, and (c) agency thinking. Items are scored using an 8-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*definitely false*) to 8 (*definitely true*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of goal directed thinking, motivation to reach goals, and ability to think of multiple ways to reach goals. The HSR shows good internal reliability across subscales ( $\alpha = .64$  to  $\alpha = .81$ ) and for the overall scale ( $\alpha = .86$  to  $\alpha = .88$ ).

### RESULTS

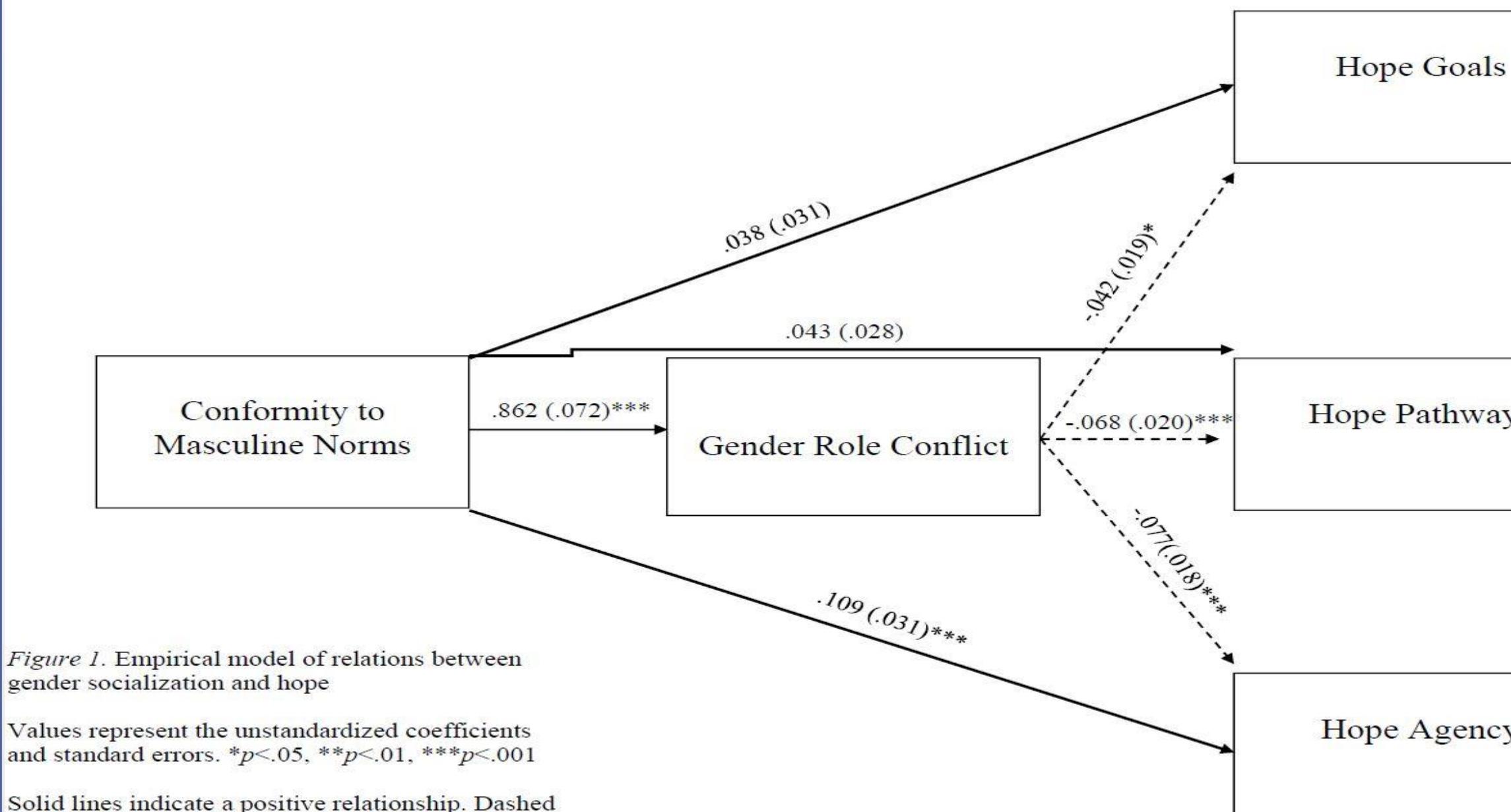


Table 1  
Bootstrap Analysis of Magnitude and Significance of Indirect Effects Gender Socialization and Hope

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Hope Goals	-.036	.016*	-.069 -.004
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Hope Pathways	-.058	.018**	-.094 -.028
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Hope Agency	-.067	.017**	-.100 -.038

Note: \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ . If the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero, then the effects are considered significant (see Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006).

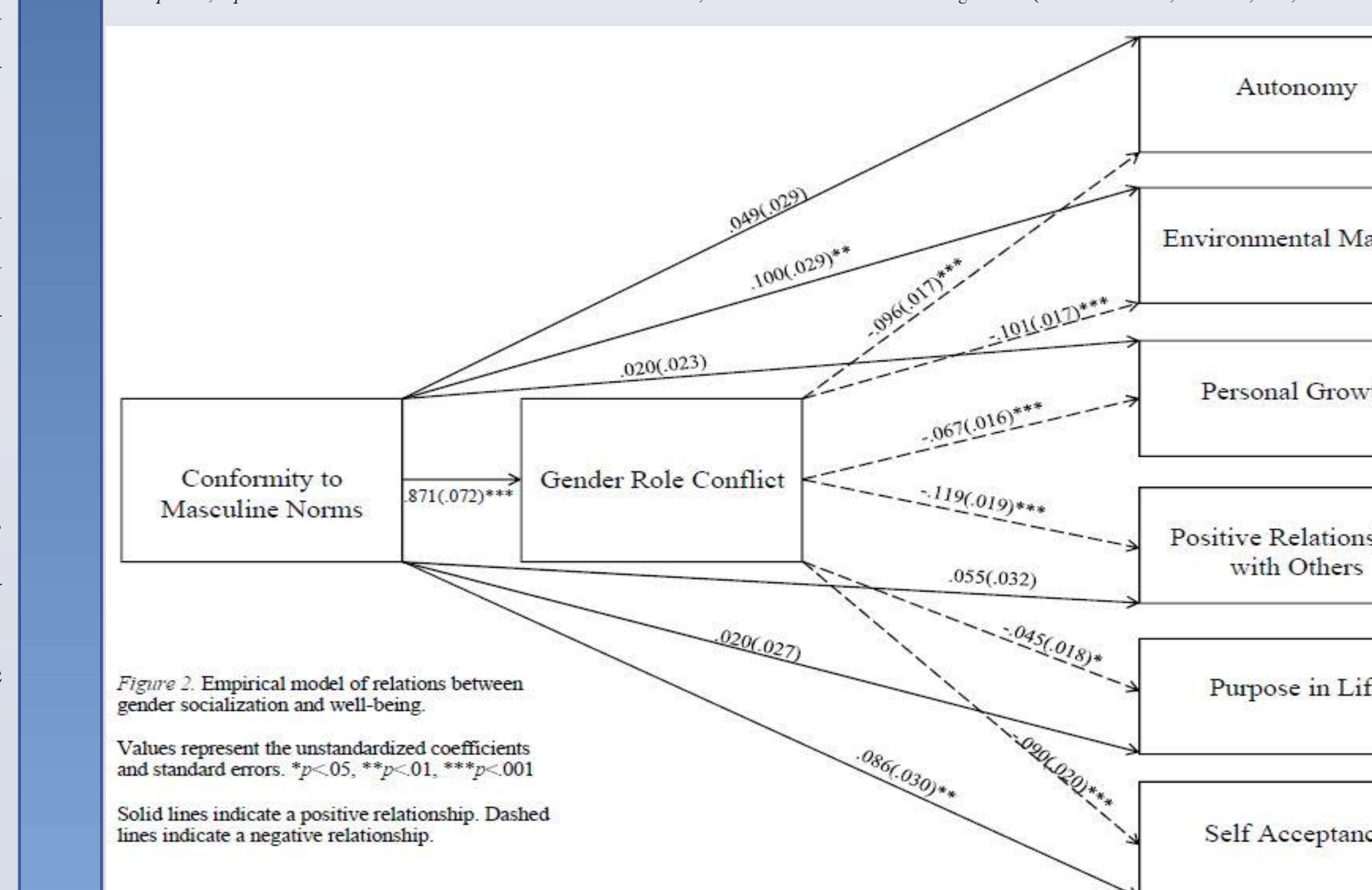


Table 2  
Bootstrap Analysis of Magnitude and Significance of Indirect Effects Gender Socialization and Well-being

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Autonomy	-.084	.016**	-.116 -.051
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Environmental Mastery	-.088	.017**	-.121 -.051
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Personal Growth	-.059	.019**	-.097 -.029
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Positive Relationships with Others	-.103	.019*	-.153 -.066
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Purpose in Life	-.039	.017*	-.081 -.006
CMNI-46 Total	GRCS Total	Self Acceptance	-.078	.019**	-.126 -.042

Note: \* $p<.05$ ; \*\* $p<.01$ . If the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero, then the effects are considered significant (see Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006).

### RESULTS

Results indicated that CMN is positively related to agency thinking, whereas higher levels of GRC are associated with decreased goals, pathways, and agency thinking (Figure 1). Mediation analysis revealed that GRC mediated relations between CMN and hope goals, pathways, and agency (Table 1). The same analysis was conducted for hypothesis two. Results indicated that CMN is positively related to environmental mastery and self-acceptance, whereas GRC is associated with decreased autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Figure 2). Mediation analysis revealed that GRC mediated relations between CMN and all six domains of psychological well-being (Table 2).

### DISCUSSION

This is the first study to date in the literature examining relationships between conformity to masculine norms, gender role conflict, and the positive outcomes of hope and Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being. The results of this study partially support H2, indicating that CMN is positively related to agency thinking, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance. It should be noted that CMN was not a significant predictor of hope or psychological well-being. These findings suggest that men's conformity to masculine norms can be adaptive and promote positive functioning. Furthermore, results supporting H3 indicate that GRC has a negative effect on positive functioning. This outcome adds to the literature on the deleterious effects GRC has on men. In addition, these findings suggest that GRC limits men's ability to fulfill their potential across intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Finally, support was found for H4 and H5, indicating that GRC mediated relations between CMN and hope and well-being. These are perhaps the most important and concerning results from the study. What it suggests is that CMN, when adhered to in a way that is not oppressive to the self or others, is not negative for men (see Figure 1 & 2); but problems do occur when CMN leads to GRC causing a floundering of men's overall positive functioning across all domains assessed.

#### Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability due to the predominantly White heterosexual sample. These restrictions limit the ability to apply the findings to racially and sexually diverse populations. In addition, the use of self-report data may limit accuracy of reports. Future research could delineate specific masculine norms that are predictive of hope and well-being related variables.

#### Implications

The findings of this study provide further evidence for the link between gender socialization and positive functioning in men and can have critical clinical implications for mental health providers of men. For example, the results suggest that conformity to masculine norms can have positive benefits for men in the absence of gender role conflict. Thus, clinicians may adopt a masculine-sensitive approach (Englar-Carlson et al., 2010) that promote the strengths of masculinity while addressing the deleterious effects of gender role conflict.