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Alexithymia Moderates the Association Between Maternal Depressive Symptoms and Perceived Adolescent Adjustment

Hayne Noh

Virginia Commonwealth University, nohh@vcu.edu

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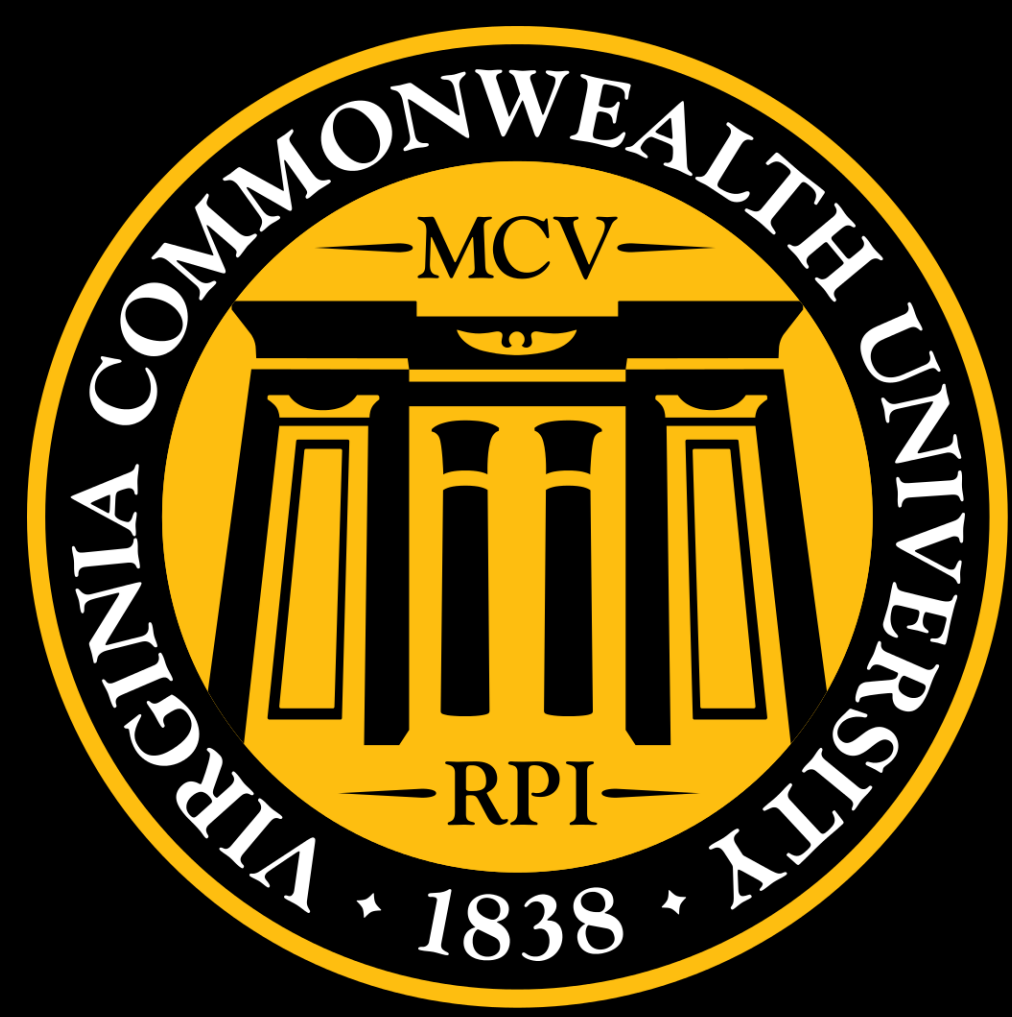
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Moderator Effects of Alexithymia on Maternal Depression and Perceived Child Adjustment

Hayne Noh

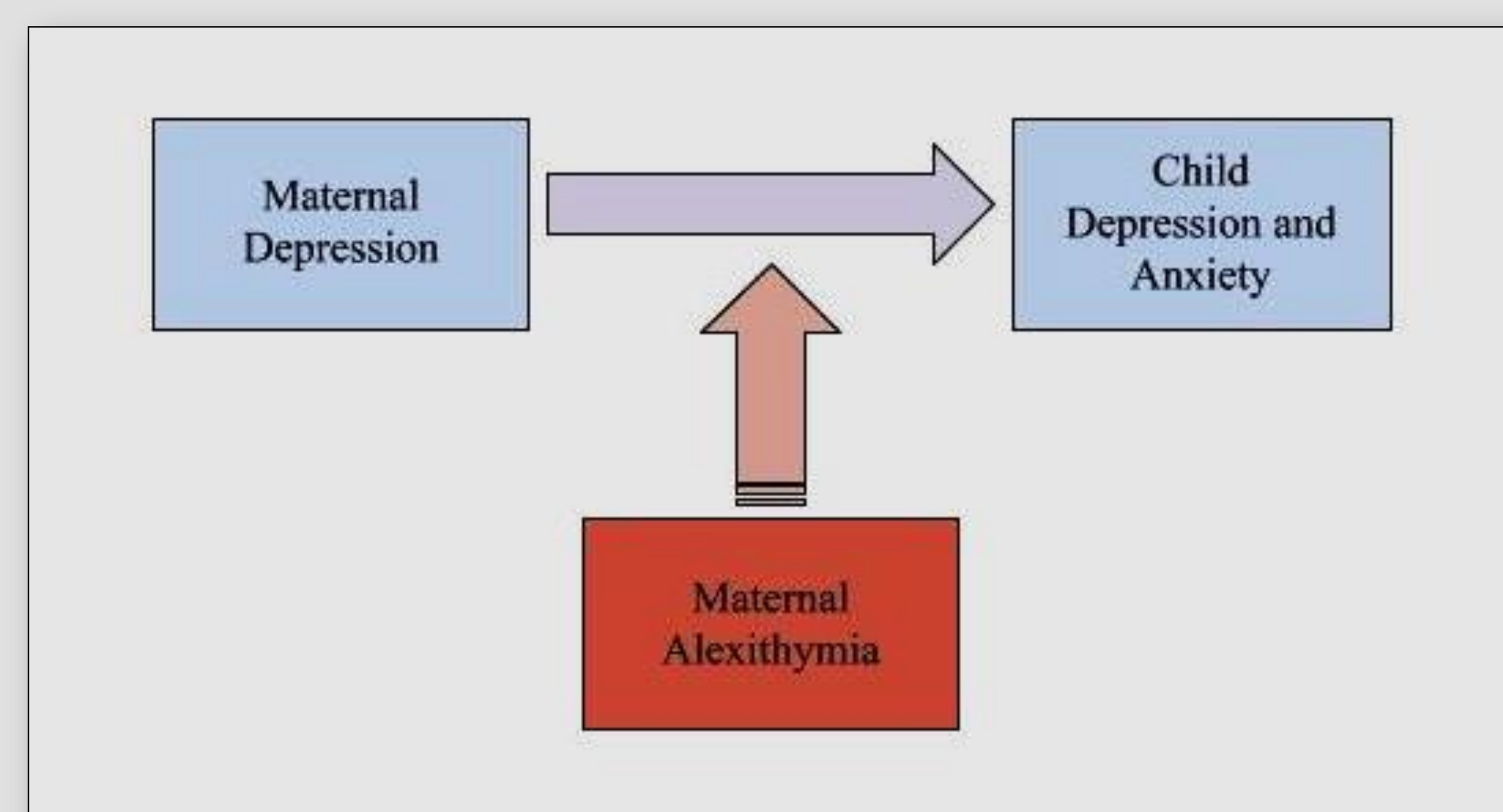
Prevention Research Lab, Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University

Introduction

African American youth rates of suicide are the highest among that of all other racial groups. (Bridge et al., 2009) Major causes of suicide include mental illness, which makes early detection of child adjustment an important issue. There is a dearth of research on the role of maternal alexithymia on child outcomes, although it has been suggested that depression and alexithymia are highly comorbid in the general adult population. Data suggest a moderate positive association between depression in mothers and over reporting of child depressive symptoms (England & Sims, 2009). However, mothers with an inability to understand their child's emotions, as is the case in mothers with Alexithymia, may present with a decreased perception of child adjustment, and thus a decreased ability to detect maladjustment.

Objective

This study aims to determine the effect of maternal alexithymia on the relationship between maternal depression and child depression and anxiety symptoms in order to elucidate the role of alexithymia on child outcomes.



Moderation of Maternal Depression and Child Depression and Anxiety [1]

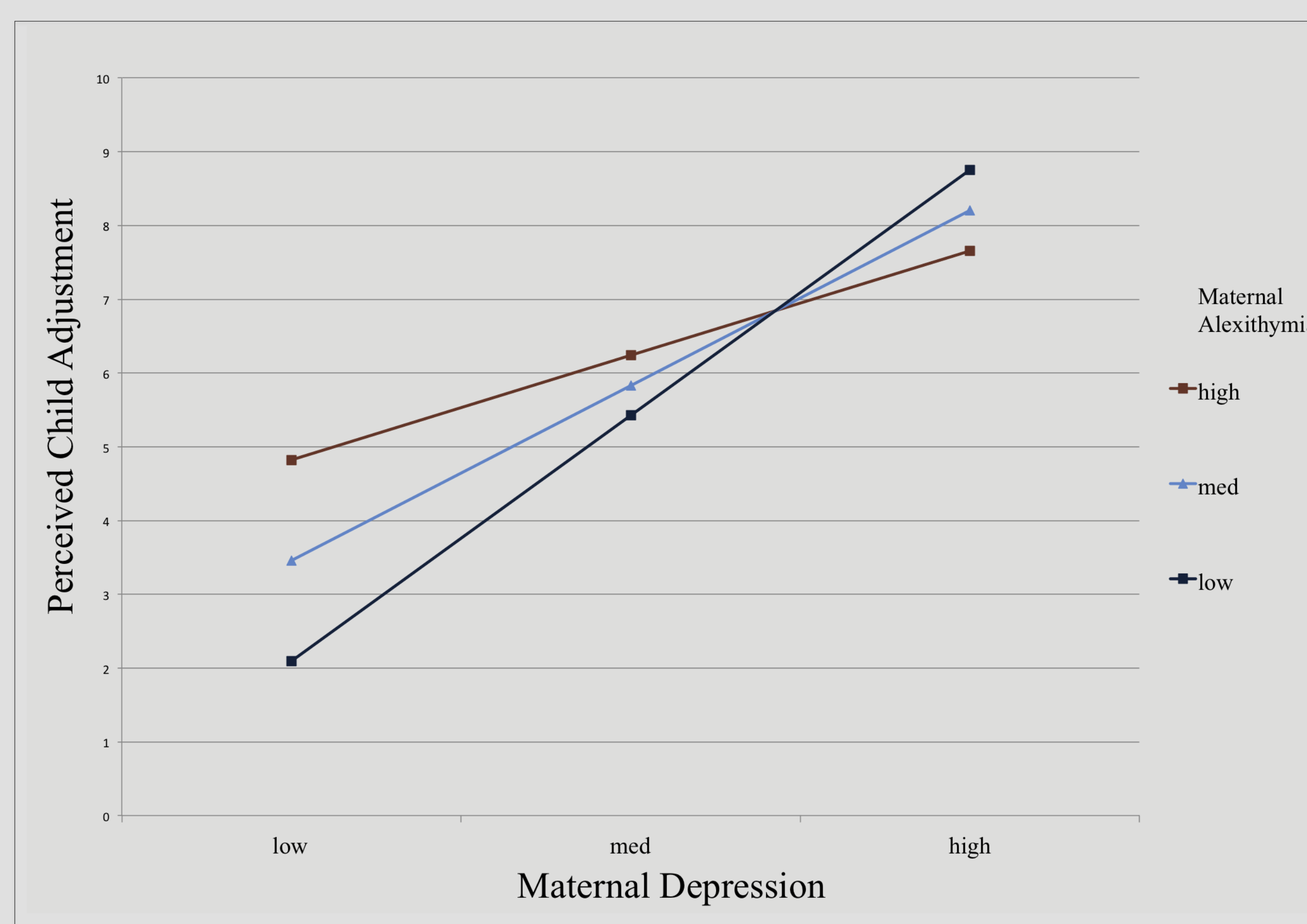
Methods

Participants: Project COPE dataset (4-year longitudinal study) N=351, M child age=12.20 years, SD=0.68 years at baseline, 53.4% female, 91.8% African American

Variable	Measures	Cronbach's Alpha
Predictor: Maternal Depression	BSI depression subscale	W1 Depression 0.86
Outcome: Child Adjustment	CBCL child depression-anxiety subscale	W1 Child Depression and Anxiety symptoms 0.85
Moderator: Maternal Alexithymia	Toronto alexithymia scale	W1 Difficulty identifying feelings 0.88 W1 Difficulty describing feelings 0.74

Wave 1 data from the COPE data set was used to conduct the analysis. Moderation analysis using SPSS, as well as bivariate correlation analysis, was used to test the hypothesis. Covariates included child age and sex.

Association Between Maternal Depression and Perceived Child Adjustment Moderated by Maternal Alexithymia [2]



Results

Moderation Analysis

Maternal depression and perceived child adjustment, defined by child depression and anxiety symptoms, are moderately, positively correlated ($R=0.350$ at $p=0.01$). A main effect was apparent for sex, such that mothers were more likely to report depressive and anxious symptoms in daughters ($R=0.108$ at $p=0.05$).

- High maternal alexithymia: attenuated the association between maternal depression and perceptions of child depressive and anxious symptoms (child adjustment)
- Low maternal alexithymia: stronger relationship between maternal depression and report of child adjustment

Model summary analysis shows significant results

- F change was 21.181 when the product term (Maternal Depression x Maternal Alexithymia) was introduced into the model. The results were significant at $p < 0.001$ Table [3].

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Discussion

The study found that maternal alexithymia moderated the relation between maternal depressive symptoms and parents' report of child symptoms of anxiety and depression. More specifically, maternal alexithymia attenuated the association between maternal depression and perceived child adjustment. Mothers with alexithymia, with a decreased ability to understand the emotions of others, would have a decreased ability to detect maladjustment.

The study was limited by the use of subscales rather than full symptoms inventories in defining maternal depression and child adjustment. The study only controlled child age and sex, while there may be other confounding variables.

Model Summary [3]

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	0.365	0.133	0.125	17.690	0.000
2	0.366	0.134	0.124	0.484	0.487
3	0.429	0.184	0.173	21.181	0.000

Model 1: (Constants), Wave 1 Maternal Depression, covariates

Model 2: (Constant), Wave 1 Maternal Depression, Wave 1 Maternal Alexithymia, covariates

Model 3: (Constant), Wave 1 Maternal Depression, Wave 1 Maternal Alexithymia, Product Term: Wave 1 Maternal Depression x Wave 1 Maternal Alexithymia, covariates

Implications

The study discusses maternal alexithymia as a potential variable factor in detecting and therefore treating child depressive and anxious symptoms. Clinicians who administer the CBCL should be aware of the role maternal alexithymia may play in accuracy of parent reports of child adjustment and consider alexithymia a significant factor in the detection of child maladjustment.

References

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Contact: Hayne Noh, nohh@vcu.edu