



Living, fast and slow: Is life history orientation associated with risk-related personality traits, risk attitudes, criminal outcomes, and gambling?



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ABSTRACT

Life history theory is an influential framework for understanding how organisms allocate time and energy towards important life functions. Life history orientations range on a continuum from “fast” to “slow”. Broadly, fast life histories characterize individuals who tend to engage in impulsive and present-oriented decision-making and behavior, whereas slow life histories characterize individuals who tend to engage in more deliberative, future-oriented decision-making and behavior. We examined whether individual differences in life history orientations are associated with risk-associated personality traits (impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and self-control), risk attitudes in multiple domains, and key risky behavioral outcomes (general gambling involvement, problem gambling tendencies, and criminality). Results indicate that relatively faster life history orientations were broadly associated with higher levels of risk-related traits, attitudes, and outcomes. Exploratory regression analyses indicated that life history orientation explained variance in criminal outcomes even when controlling for risk-relevant individual differences. Together, these findings suggest that life history orientation is broadly associated with a general “taste for risk” and risk-taking behavior.

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Life history theory was originally advanced in evolutionary biology to understand how organisms allocate scarce resources to essential life functions (Stearns, 1992). Life history in humans has been the subject of growing attention, for good reason: it offers a wide explanatory framework for understanding individual differences considered broadly (reviewed in Del Giudice, Gangestad, & Kaplan, 2015). However, empirical evidence linking individual differences in life history with risk-related traits, attitudes, and behavioral outcomes in humans has been limited. Here, we (a) review life history theory in the context of individual differences; (b) present evidence that individual differences in life history orientation should be associated with various manifestations of “taste for risk”, and (c) present a study examining associations of life history with risk-related personality traits, attitudes, and behavioral outcomes.

1.1. Life history theory

Life history theory suggests that fundamentally limited resources in life—time, energy, and effort—force tradeoffs among essential life functions (i.e., growth, reproduction, and parenting; reviewed in Stearns, 1992). Life histories broadly exist on a continuum from “fast” to “slow”. Relatively fast life histories are generally characterized by an

emphasis on reproduction at the expense of growth and parenting effort. Conversely, relatively slow life histories are generally characterized by an emphasis on long-term growth and parenting effort at the expense of immediate reproduction.

Across taxa, life histories evolved in varying environments where different strategies have historically paid off in biological fitness terms (Del Giudice et al., 2015). Insects, for example, generally exhibit fast life histories and tend to inhabit environments with larger fitness payoffs for rapid development, high fertility, low parental investment, short life expectancy, and smaller size (Figueroa et al., 2005). In contrast, most mammals, for example, generally exhibit slow life histories and tend to inhabit environments with larger fitness payoffs for slower development, lower fertility, greater parental investment, longer life expectancy, and larger size (Figueroa et al., 2005). Put simply, organisms with fast life histories exhibit behavioral strategies that focus on proximal (present-oriented) outcomes. Organisms with slow life histories exhibit behavioral strategies that focus on distal (future-oriented) outcomes. In the context of the broader animal kingdom, humans exhibit relatively slow life histories.

1.2. Individual differences and life history orientation

Although life history theory was conceived to explain interspecies differences in tradeoffs between growth, reproduction, and parenting effort, there are meaningful and quantifiable tradeoffs *within* species

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as well. These intraspecies individual differences describe an individuals' *life history orientation*. Just as different environmental contexts gave rise to different life history orientations across species, so too can different environments give rise to different orientations within species. Broadly, non-human organisms that develop in harsh and/or unpredictable environments with short projected time horizons tend to exhibit relatively fast life history orientations characterized by increased risk-taking (boldness), impulsivity, and aggression (reviewed in Del Giudice et al., 2015). Humans are no exception to this observed pattern; individuals who exhibit faster life histories tend to engage more in present-oriented behavior across a wide range of domains (reviewed in Copping, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014; Ellis et al., 2012; Mishra & Lalumière, 2008).

Individuals are not “fixed” into either a fast or slow life history orientation. In general, traits or environments that facilitate shorter time horizons and greater competitive disadvantage (e.g., being poorer, single, having low educational attainment) tend to facilitate more present-oriented, impulsive, and risky behavioral strategies (Copping et al., 2014; Daly & Wilson, 2005; Hill, Ross, & Low, 1997; Wilson & Daly, 1985; reviewed in Mishra, Barclay, & Sparks, 2017). These circumstances are necessarily a product of some interaction of situational factors (e.g., being poor because of a bad economic climate) and embodied factors (e.g., being poor because of not possessing embodied skills or abilities). However, regardless of their source, these traits and/or situations are indicators of one's time horizon and competitive situation (i.e., one's “relative state”; Mishra, Barclay, & Sparks, 2017), and thus serve as inputs into general life history orientation.

1.3. Life history and risk

Growing research has linked life history relevant traits and circumstances (e.g., age, gender, parenting status, subjective and objective life expectancy, economic inequality, perceived competitive disadvantage, the Dark Triad) with risk-taking (e.g., Crysel, Crosier, & Webster, 2013; Eibach & Mock, 2011; Hill & Chow, 2002; Hill et al., 1997; Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumière, 2014; Wang, Kruger, & Wilke, 2009; Wilson & Daly, 1997). These findings suggest that individuals' risk-taking is in part a product of both time horizon cues and competitive (dis-)advantage cues (with shorter time horizons and greater competition facilitating greater risk-taking), consistent with a life history account. Surprisingly little research has linked life history orientation with other risk-related behavioral phenomenon, including personality. A number of stable traits have been robustly associated with risk-taking in multiple domains, including impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and low self-control (e.g., Mishra & Lalumière, 2011). Given that these personality traits represent stable “taste for risk” tendencies, it follows that life history orientation should be robustly associated with these individual differences. Similarly, risk attitudes represent proximate appraisals of the costs and benefits of risk-taking, and should similarly be associated with life history orientation. However, to our knowledge, only one study has examined whether individual differences in life history orientation are associated with personality traits associated with risk-taking; Copping, Campbell, and Muncer (2013) found that two biometric markers of life history orientation (age of puberty and number of sexual partners) were associated with impulsivity and sensation-seeking. No other studies have examined whether life history orientation is associated with individual differences in self-control or risk attitudes.

There has also been little research that has examined psychometrically measured individual differences in life history orientation in the context of risk-related outcomes. Most of the research reviewed above has linked individual life history-relevant traits (e.g., age, gender) with risk-related outcomes. However, some have argued that such individual-level trait analyses (which have been characterized as a “biometric” approach) ignore higher order latent factor structures in life history orientation (Figueredo et al., 2015; but see Copping et al., 2014). Consequently, such measures as the Mini-K (Figueredo et al., 2006) have

been developed to assess latent life history orientation (termed the “psychometric” approach). However, as both Figueredo et al. (2015) and Richardson et al. (2017) note, there is virtue in using multiple (complementary) approaches to assess life history orientation. It remains the case that relatively few studies have examined whether a latent “psychometric” life history orientation factor is associated with risk-related traits, attitudes, and outcomes.

1.4. Overview

The research reviewed above suggests that life history orientation is an important individual difference that is broadly relevant to risk-propensity, risk attitudes, and risk-taking behavior. In the present study, we examined whether life history orientation is associated with (a) individual differences in personality traits associated with risk (i.e., impulsivity, sensation-seeking, low self-control); (b) risk attitudes in multiple domains, (c) general gambling behavior and problem gambling tendencies, and (d) criminal outcomes. This research replicates and extends previous work in several ways.

First, only one study, to our knowledge, has examined the association of life history (assessed through two biometric indicators) and personality traits associated with risk-taking (impulsivity and sensation-seeking; Copping et al., 2013). We replicate and extend this work by examining the association of life history orientation (measured psychometrically) with impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and self-control (a key trait associated with risk-propensity). Furthermore, we examine the association of life history orientation with risk attitudes in multiple domains, an investigation that has not been yet conducted.

Second, only one study has examined the association of life history orientation and gambling (Tifferet, Agrest, & Shlomo, 2011). Although suggestive of a link, this study is limited given its very small sample ($n = 70$) consisting of only men. Furthermore, Tifferet et al. (2011) used only a single measure of problem gambling tendencies (the South Oaks Gambling Screen). The present study involves a very large sample ($n = 742$) of both men and women, and we examine the link between life history orientation and multiple measures of gambling and problem gambling tendencies.

Third, we examined multiple criminal outcomes in the context of life history (having been arrested, charged, convicted, and/or incarcerated for a crime). Previous research linking aspects of life history orientation to criminal outcomes has almost exclusively focused on examination of archival criminal records (e.g., Wilson & Daly, 1997). Furthermore, this research has not utilized the aforementioned “psychometric” approach to assessing life history orientation. We predicted in line with previous research that relatively faster life history associations would be associated with higher levels of traits associated with risk, pro-risk attitudes, greater general gambling involvement and problem gambling tendencies, and with criminal outcomes.

2. Methods and measures

Data were collected on Crowdfunder, an online crowdsourcing platform. Such platforms have been widely used in both clinical and behavioral research (reviewed in Chandler and Shapiro, 2016), and have been shown to be demonstrably useful for gambling research in particular (Mishra & Carleton, 2017). A total of 789 participants entered the study. Of these, 47 exited before completion, leaving 742 participants (325 male, 415 female, 1 trans*, 1 gender not reported; age: $M = 36.4$, $SD = 12.1$, range = 18 to 76). Participant recruitment was restricted to the Anglosphere—western, English-speaking countries with a similar cultural heritage (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States)—although we note that all recruited participants ended up reporting being from the United States.

Participants completed several demographic measures: age, gender, employment status, relationship status, household income, personal income, and highest educational attainment. Compensation was \$0.50

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