Childhood stress, life history, psychopathy, and sociosexuality

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Early Life Stress (ELS) and Life History (LH) strategy impact personality and attitudes toward infidelity, mating effort, and casual sex. A sample of 300 participants reported biodemographic behavioral outcomes, such as their number of lifetime sex partners, which correlated with ELS, LH strategy, and unrestricted sociosexual attitudes (albeit not strongly). A structural equations model was specified and demonstrated that effects of ELS and LH on unrestricted sociosexual attitudes were partially mediated through psychopathy. ELS, LH, and an antagonistic social schema increased psychopathy, which then directly increased unrestricted sociosexual attitudes. These results support the theory that psychopathy is an adaptive trait meant to increase short-term mating opportunities.

1. Introduction

Organisms developing in environments where levels of harshness or unpredictability vary may maximize fitness by adopting distinct behavioral repertoires, such as alternate Life History (LH) strategies. LH theory predicts that varying amounts of stress will produce differing individual biodemographic outcomes. Lineages evolving and individuals developing in high stress environments become faster LH strategists allocating greater energy toward mating effort, evolving traits such as (1) earlier pubertal timing, (2) greater number of mating partners and offspring, and (3) earlier age of first parturition (Ellis, Figueredo, Brumbach, & Schlomer, 2009; Figueredo, Patch, & Ceballos, 2015). Alternately, lineages evolving and individuals developing in low stress environments will become slower LH strategists, allocating greater bioenergetic resources to somatic effort (including growth) and parental effort; they evolve traits such as: (1) later first parturition, (2) fewer offspring, (3) high parental investment, and (4) extended lifespan (Ellis et al., 2009). In humans, childhood harshness or unpredictability (dimensions of stress) in the early life environment may depend on a multitude of factors (the stressors), such as: (1) physical, sexual, or verbal abuse; (2) physical or emotional neglect; (3) growing up with a mentally ill parent, other than a parent; (4) parental incarceration; (5) witnessing or experiencing domestic violence; (6) growing up in a low socioeconomic status or crime-ridden neighborhood; and (7) malnutrition (Felitti et al., 1998; Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011; Ellis et al., 2009; Simpson, Griskevicius, Kuo, Sung, & Collins, 2012).

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LH theory makes predictions about psychological traits as well as biodemographic outcomes, with harsh or unpredictable environments selecting for distinct constellations of psychosocial characteristics (Figueredo et al., 2014). Faster LH individuals maintain positive attitudes toward promiscuity (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2010), are more impulsive and less rule governed (Figueredo et al., 2015), more likely to develop antagonistic social schemata (Patch, Figueredo, García, & Kavanagh, submitted), and may also have elevated psychopathic, narcissistic, or Machiavellian tendencies (collectively referred to as the Dark Triad; Jonason et al., 2016). Conversely, slower LH strategists maintain positive attitudes toward long-term pair-bonding and monogamy (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2009) and demonstrate mutualistic social schemata which include traits such as cooperation, delayed gratification, higher levels of empathy, and rule governed behavior (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2010; Patch et al., submitted; Figueredo et al., 2015).

Certain psychosocial traits, such as psychopathy, predict higher mating effort. Dark Triad (DT) traits are important correlates of mating effort as they predict higher number of sex partners and more positive attitudes toward short-term mating (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). It has been argued that DT traits persist in subclinical populations as an adaptation to procure short-term mating opportunities (among other things; Jonason et al., 2016). Additionally, as mentioned above, faster LH strategists are less likely to follow rules (Figueredo et al., 2015). One rule, which directly impacts mating, is the currently prevailing social norm “Don’t Cheat [on your partner]” (Coontz, 2006). We would expect faster LH strategists to violate this societal rule by participating in extrapair copulations more frequently. The adaptive strategy of passing on their genes before a premature death encourages gene capture as well as participating in activities that provide instant gratification. Extrapair copulations serve as an alternate reproductive tactic to
increase mating opportunities while continuing to reap benefits of long-term pairbonds. In contrast, slower LH strategists adhere to the "Don't Cheat" rule more stringently to avoid the aversive consequences of social non-conformity. Their stable environmental conditions fostered maintaining long-term relationships (Olderbak & Figueredo, 2009), and their well-developed executive functions allow them to plan for the future and inhibit certain responses (including cheating).

1.1. Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, the following are our hypotheses:
1) Early Life Stress should increase LH speed by selecting for a faster strategy; 2) Slow LH speed should increase mutualistic social strategies and decrease antagonism and psychopathy; 3) Slow LH should increase executive functions and rule governance; 4) Rule governance and executive functions should decrease positive attitudes toward casual sex; 5) Psychopathy should increase positive attitudes toward casual sex.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Three hundred undergraduates from a Southwestern US university undergraduate psychology subject pool participated in this study. The sample was 66% female with a mean age of 19.06 years (SD = 1.7, range 18–35). Ethnicity distribution was 59% white, 18% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 3% African American, 4% other. Two participants identified as Native American, and 3 declined to identify their ethnicity.

2.2. Procedure

The participants completed a set of self-report measures online to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. All participants gave informed consent and were debriefed in person. The data were collected using Qualtrics data collection software. Participants who were under 18 were allowed to participate in the study for credit, however, their data was removed before analysis.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Early Life Stress (ELS)

Unit-weighted composite scores for the ELS construct were estimated by computing the means of the standardized scores for all non-missing scales (Figueredo, McKnight, McKnight, & Sidani, 2000). A description of each of the constituent scales follows, identifying the four most likely developmental sources of harshness and unpredictability, and therefore, ELS.

2.3.1.1. Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE; Felitti et al., 1998). The ACE measures trauma and is broken down into 5 major components: Marriage, Family, Abuse, Violence, and Parents. Marriage was excluded, as the vast majority of participants were not yet married. A point is given for each response confirming a trauma, then the points are summed to create a composite score within each of the 4 areas; more points equates to more trauma experienced.

2.3.1.2. Neighborhood Context Scale (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 2002). The neighborhood scale measured the perceived safety of their childhood neighborhood. Only questions referring to childhood environment were used. Sample items include, “I grew up in a safe neighborhood.” Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert Scale.

2.3.1.3. Material Needs Scale (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). The material needs scale measured the perceived levels of economic stress a respondent experienced during childhood. Items ask about availability of accommodation, food, clothing, and medical care. This scale is intended to measure harshness of the environment.

2.3.1.4. A Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). The parenting scale consisted of measures of mother and father sensitivity, which can identify child abuse and levels of parental investment. Participants report their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale.

2.3.2. Higher-order LH (Super-K)

2.3.2.1. LH strategy. The Mini-K Short Form (Figueredo et al., 2006) measures slow LH strategy. The Mini-K consists of 20 items and is a short form of the Arizona Life History Battery (Figueredo, 2007). The Mini-K measures a variety of LH indicators such as familial closeness and risk avoidance rated on a 7-point Likert scale (−3 = strongly disagree; +3 = strongly agree). Slower LH strategies were also measured using the High-K Strategy Scale (HKSS; Giosan, 2006). The scale consists of 26 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (−2 = strongly disagree; +2 = strongly agree). It contains items that are indicators of health, “upward mobility,” and extended family; all are attempting to measure the larger latent LH factor.

2.3.2.2. Covitality. Current health status was measured using the Rand 36 Item Health Survey: Version 1 (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992). The Rand 36 Short Form correlates with the Mini-K as a measure of slow LHS. The measure consists of 36 items assessing emotional and physical well-being.

2.3.2.3. Personality. The General Factor of Personality was measured using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003). The TIPI consists of 10 items, measured using a 7-point Likert scale (−3 = disagree strongly to +3 = agree strongly). The TIPI measures the Big 5 personality dimensions.

2.3.3. Dark Triad personalities

The DT personalities were measured using two different inventories. These inventories were not combined, as they represent two distinct approaches to the measurement of DT traits.

2.3.3.1. The Dark Inventory (DI; Patch et al., submitted). The DI is a measure of DT characteristics that does not classify the three personalities into separate traits, but rather groups them according to varying social schemata: antagonistic and mutualistic. In addition, a third cluster of the scale, Affective and Cognitive Lability (ACL), measures impulsive attitudes, boredom, and ability to remain calm under stressful circumstances. The Antagonistic Social Schema (ASS) cluster consists of higher-DT traits: (1) Deception, (2) Grandiosity, (3) External Blame, (4) Suspiration of others and their motives, and (5) Social Non-conformity. Mutualistic Social Schema (MSS) consists of lower-DT traits: (1) Emotional Empathy, (2) Emotional Attachment, and (3) Affiliative Dominance. Lability consists of two higher-DT components: (1) impulsivity and (2) stress reactivity. Participants rate how much they agree or disagree with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (−3 = strongly disagree; +3 = strongly agree). Each of these scales is estimated as the mean of each cluster (αAntagonistic = .86, αMutualistic = .69, αLability = .64), with certain items reversed. When constructing the general DI factor, the entire MSS cluster is reversed.

2.3.3.2. Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The SD3 consists of 27 items that measure the three classic DT personalities: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy (αMachiavellianism = .80, αNarcissism = .58, αPsychopathy = .78). Items assess DT characteristics such as grandiosity, manipulation, and risk taking. Participants rate how much they agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert scale. The present study focuses solely on the psychopathy construct.
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