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Life History Theory and Condom Use Intentions

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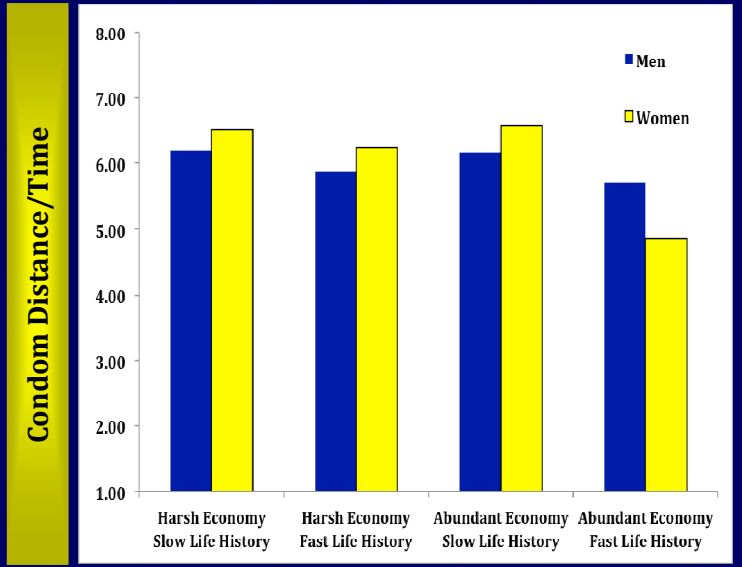
Introduction

Life history theory suggests that an individual's environment influences their allocation of bodily resources and effort towards different aspects of survival—investment in physical development versus reproduction (Pianka, 1970). Harsh, unpredictable environments elicit fast life history strategies—high rate of reproduction and lower parental investment, whereas abundant, predictable environments evoke a slow life history strategy—low reproduction rates and greater parental investment. We hypothesize that individuals living in unpredictable environments engage in risky sexual behaviors because the long-term costs of such behaviors have been historically lower than the short-term benefits of procuring a reproductive opportunity, which may otherwise not be guaranteed. Previous research suggests that an individual's response to resource scarcity is moderated by their early life environment. When exposed to descriptions of economic recession, individuals who experienced a harsh childhood indicated a greater interest in immediate rewards and risky investing than individuals who did not, even though there were no differences between groups when exposed to neutral economic conditions (Griskevicius et al., 2013). Our goal in this study is to examine the effects of environment and Life History strategy on one type of sexually risky behavior – failure to use contraception.



Methods

Participants
157 male and 151 female undergraduates participated. Mean age = 20.36, *SD* = 1.50; 46% were in an exclusive relationship.

Design & Procedure
Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (Harsh Economy or Abundant Economy) in which they read a story about economic decline or economic growth and also completed a questionnaire assessing their life history strategy.

Dependent Variable: Condom Search Time
They then reported how long they would go searching for a condom (both in physical distance and time) while in "the heat of the moment with a new partner" before they gave up and had sex without a condom. Therefore, lower scores, reflect spending less time searching for a condom.

This yielded a 2(Participant Sex) x 2(Condition: Harsh Economy, Abundant Economy; between-subjects) x 2(Life History Strategy: Fast vs. Slow; between-subjects) design on condom search time.

Results

A between-subjects ANOVA did not detect a significant three-way interaction (p = .44).

Main Effects
Fast life history strategists spent significantly less time searching for a condom than slow life history strategists (p < .01).

Condition x Life History Interaction for Women
Women in the abundant economy condition who were fast life history strategists spent significantly less time searching for a condom than women in the other three conditions, (ps < .01). There was no interaction for men.

Discussion

Women who were fast life history strategists were less likely to use a condom than women who were slow life history strategists. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was not a significant effect of economic environment on condom use intentions. However, there was a significant interaction between economic environment and life history strategy, such that women in the abundant economy condition who were fast life history strategists were significantly less likely to use a condom than women in the other three conditions. We hypothesize that because abundant economies pose fewer costs to women's reproduction than harsh economies, women living in an abundant economy are more capable of enacting their preferred mating strategy. For fast life history strategists, this mating strategy is characterized by a high rate of reproduction and increased sexual risk-taking behavior. This same phenomenon was not found for men, and we hypothesize that this is due to the greater potential costs associated with sexual intercourse for women than men (e.g. pregnancy, decreased immune response). Finally, there is a possible difference between the effects of economic conditions and resource scarcity on behavior. For example, a bad economy may not lead an individual to believe their longevity is uncertain, but that they will simply have a lower standard of living. Future research should further distinguish between the effects of the economy and the effects of longevity certainty on sexual health decision making.