Young People, Alcohol and Sex: What’s consent got to do with it?

Alcohol’s Role in Sexual Aggression

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My Background and Perspective
Overview of Presentation

Definitions, Prevalence, Caveats
Alcohol’s Effects on Perpetrators and Victims

• Psychological Effects: Beliefs about Alcohol
• Pharmacological Effects: Cognitive & Motor Impairments
• Judgments about Responsibility After Assault

Summary and Implications
Alcohol’s Role is Complex!

- Alcohol is one of many risk factors - makes it easier for some individuals to use force.
- Alcohol acts in conjunction with individuals’ characteristics and the environmental norms.
- Society has the capacity to influence beliefs about alcohol and change norms regarding acceptable behavior.
Researchers’ Definitions

**Rape:**
Penetrative sex achieved through force, threat of force, lack of consent, or inability to give consent, for any reason including intoxication.

**Sexual Assault/Sexual Aggression:**
Any type of unwanted sexual activity achieved through verbal pressure, threats, force, or inability to give consent.
Perpetration Prevalence Estimates

Questions phrased in terms of:
• sex obtained against her wishes.
• when it was clear she didn’t want to have sex.
• when she was unable to consent.

Kanin (1969): 25% since starting college
Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski (1987): 25%
Range in college samples: 21% - 61%
Range in community samples: 22% - 64%

About half occur on a “date.”
Most others in social situations -- party, bar.
Alcohol-involved Sexual Assaults

Across studies, about 50%.

- Range 30% - 75%.
- Usually both drinking.
Caveat about Causality

If half of sexual assaults involve alcohol:
- Clearly not required.

Among that 50%:

**What is causal direction?**
1. Alcohol as cause.
2. Desire to misbehave as cause.
3. Other variables responsible for the relationship.

Each of these explanations can be true.
Model of Alcohol’s Role in Sexual Assault

Prior to Assault: Psychological Effects of Alcohol

**Perpetrator:**
* Self expectancies
* Stereotypes about drinking women
* Alcohol as a sexual signal

**Victim:**
* Self expectancies
* Perpetrator’s selection of victim

During the Assault: Pharmacological Effects of Alcohol

**Perpetrator:**
* Cognitive impairments bias perception of woman
* Heightened aggression

**Victim:**
* Cognitive impairments bias risk assessment
* Motor impairment

After the Assault: Explanations Based on Alcohol

**Perpetrator:**
* Alcohol as post hoc excuse

**Victim:**
* Blamed for losing control
Putting Alcohol in Context

**Common Predictors of Perpetration**

Childhood sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.  
Hostility toward women.  
Rape supportive beliefs.  
Sexual dominance.  
Positive attitudes about casual sex.  
Misperception of women’s sexual intentions.  
Delinquency.  
Impulsivity.  
Narcissism.  
Lack of empathy.  
**Heavy alcohol consumption.**
Putting Alcohol in Context

Perpetrators Typically Require:

• Confluence of Factors
• Probabilistic Relationship:
  • Alcohol can help create the necessary” circumstances.
  • Alcohol makes it easier to cross personal violence threshold.
Are Intoxicated Perpetrators Unique?

Perpetrators who drink -- and perpetrators who have sex with an intoxicated victim -- are similar to other perpetrators on most risk factors:

- personality.
- beliefs.
- past behavior.

They differ in:

- alcohol expectancies.
- alcohol consumption.
Alcohol makes it easier to talk to people you don’t know well.
Alcohol lowers sexual inhibitions.
Alcohol increases aggression.
Gender-based double standards regarding sexual behavior and alcohol are still common.

A woman who has 2 drinks is perceived as sexually available.

Expectancies drive perceptions and behavior.
Does Alcohol Cause Confusion about Consent?

Norris and Cubbins (1992):

• Couple drink alcohol together or do not.
• Later man uses extreme physical force to obtain sex.
• Woman is clearly resisting and upset.
• **Sober male and female participants rated what happened as more consensual when they had been drinking alcohol together.**
Pharmacological Effects

Two standard drinks of abstraction.
• conceptualization.
• planning.
• problem-solving.
• integration of conflicting information.
• response inhibition.
Cognitive Impairments

Focus on most salient cues.
• Difficult to notice and correct own errors.
• Less aware of the impact of actions on others.

Focus on short-term gratification.
Short-circuits link between anxiety and behavior.
• Don’t care about risk.
Cognitive Impairments Applied to Sexual Assault

Alcohol expectancies, general beliefs about sex, and cognitive impairments work together synergistically.

- Expect drinking woman to be interested in having sex.
- Expectations bias perceptions so refusals can be construed as “playing hard to get” among men who believe rape myths.
- Cognitive impairments let perpetrators focus on their arousal and sense of entitlement.
- And ignore woman’s signs of distress and refusals.
Lab Evidence: Alcohol and General Aggression

At blood alcohol levels of .08 - .10:

- Men behave more aggressively.

Stronger effects when:

- feel provoked.
- have personality traits such as
  - high anger.
  - low empathy.

Alcohol most likely to increase aggression among those prone to aggression.
Lab Evidence: Alcohol and Sexual Aggression

Intoxicated men who read a date rape scenario:

- believe woman enjoyed it.
- think man acted appropriately.
- would use force in similar situation.

If sexually aroused:

- View the use of force to get the woman to have sex is acceptable.
- Especially if they are high in trait hostility (general and toward women).
After the Assault: Justifications

A time out from normal rules.
• Particularly when a “release” is perceived as being needed.
• Work hard, play hard ethos.

Date rapists believe:
• Their behavior is normal.
• They just got a little carried away when drinking.
• Real criminals use weapons and assault strangers.
Contribution of Peer Norms

Desire to prove masculinity to peers can be a strong motivator. Peer groups share beliefs about:

- Alcohol’s effects on men and women.
- How to treat women - sexual objectification.
- Norms for party behavior.
  - How “wild” one can get when intoxicated without being stigmatized.
Victims’ Alcohol Consumption

At each step that alcohol influences perpetrators’ thoughts and actions,

- It also influences victims’ thoughts and actions.
Women’s Alcohol Expectancies

“Walking a cognitive tightrope” trying to balance affiliation and safety needs.
Cognitive Impairments and Risk Perception

Less able to perceive risky situations and dangerous men.

- May miss the cues that show he’s crossed a line and is becoming threatening.

More conflict and uncertainty about how to respond.

- Less likely to resist assertively and forcefully.
Earlier Victimization

- Self-medication is a coping strategy commonly used by victims of sexual violence.
- The stress dampening effects of alcohol can make it easier to feel comfortable in potential sexual situations.
- In lab studies, women previously victimized often freeze when presented with sexual assault scenarios.
Alcohol and Motor Impairments

During an assault, unlikely to be able to resist effectively if intoxicated:
• fewer resistance strategies.
• completed rapes more common.

At some level of intoxication, unable to give consent.
(even if conscious)
Perpetrators’ Selection of a Victim

Some perpetrators’ use the woman’s intoxication as part of their strategy:

- may encourage heavy drinking.
- or target and take advantage of a woman who is already intoxicated.

Alcohol is the #1 date rape drug.
After the Assault: Explanations

Sexual double standards about sex and alcohol may cause victim to be blamed.

Women held responsible for:

• Controlling men’s sexuality
• Keeping things from going too far.
• Losing control when intoxicated.

Women often judged more harshly if they’d been drinking.

• Less likely to be believed by others.

Many women internalize society’s standards.
(Macy et al. 2006)
Summary Based on Research Findings

Alcohol plays a causal role in sexual aggression.
Alcohol works synergistically with other risk factors, making sexual aggression more likely:
- for individuals with certain personality traits, attitudes, and behavioral histories.
- and in certain situations.
  - for example: highly sexualized dance parties & bars.

Important to consider alcohol’s effects as a sexually permissive cue:
- even sober participants link alcohol and consensual sex (Norris & Cubbins, 1992).
Development of Effective Programs

Beliefs about alcohol’s effects can be modified. Make negative consequences most salient!
Development of Effective Programs

Facilitate peer and cultural norms that:

- Do not excuse transgressions committed when intoxicated.
- Zero tolerance for sexual objectification of women.

Bystander intervention programs.
Men Need to Know

It is unwise to trust one’s perceptions of a potential partner’s sexual interest when intoxicated.

What men label as seduction can be perceived as coercive by women.

• Ask, don’t assume!
• Need explicit consent.

If you aren’t sure if she’ll remember what happened in the morning, stop now!
Women Need to Know

How men perceive intoxicated women.
  • This does not excuse inappropriate behavior but need to be aware of risk.
Be aware of alcohol’s effects on self.
Thank you!

Comments?
Suggestions?
Questions?