

Young People, Alcohol, and Sex:

What's Consent Got to Do With It?



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



From Loss of Inhibition to Loss of Control: University Student Perceptions of Alcohol Use, Gender, and Non- Consenting Sexual Activity

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Background to This Study

- MacNeela & Bredin (2011): Described a high threshold for acceptable drunkenness among female undergrads:
 - Eimear: *A litre vodka.*
 - Suzie: *Any more than makes you vomit.*
 - Amy: *... sloshed or really, really drunk ... stumbling down and slipping ... falling down or slurring your words ... Talking nonsensical things, maybe exhibitionism.*
- But strong group norms mark the boundaries of acceptability (*‘those messy girls’*)
- ➔ Freedom and Regulation

Background to This Study

- Alcohol-related freedom and regulation concerning sexual expression:
 - *'If there is someone I like and they are going to be out, then I just plan on getting lingers so I will go up and talk to them'*
 - *'If I had gotten with a guy sober and brought them home, that would prove to me that I'm a slut, like ... whereas if you're drunk you can blame it on the drink. That can be your excuse and you weren't in your right mind, and you didn't know what you were doing.'*
 - *'It's repulsive though, like there are girls in college who you know make a dive for lads across the dance floor and literally following them. It couldn't be more degrading really.'*
- ➔ *High threshold for acceptable drunkenness*
- ➔ *Clear ideas about what is inappropriate*

Background to This Study



- **McCaffrey et al. (2014): Online survey of 1,144 university students**
- Approx. 43% of students reported regular binge drinking (males: 51%, females: 38%), 36% binge drinking once a month or more, but less than once a week
 - *Among the most frequently reported consequences of another person's drinking were: Verbal abuse by someone (65%), and **unwanted physical/sexual advances without consent (51%)***
 - *Gender difference: **Females (60%) report unwanted advances without consent more than male students (37%)***
 - *Both genders equally likely to report being **forced or pressured into having sex (8%)***
 - *Being hit/assaulted (97%), **forced/pressured into sex (96%)**, and passenger in a car with intoxicated driver (96%) among the most unacceptable/highly unacceptable consequences*
 - *Frequent binge drinkers more likely to experience all consequences related to others' drinking, compared to infrequent binge drinkers*

Findings: Alcohol

- **Alcohol as an enabler: Opening the door to social confidence, friendships, relationships, fun**
- Particularly important in First Year
- Self-limits on consumption were subjective and contextual
 - e.g. Limits depend on: Nightclub, friends' norms, drinking games, type of alcohol, amount consumed before before vomiting, etc.

Findings: Consent to Sex

RESP 1: I think if someone is really, really drunk and they can't...they aren't physically able to say yes or no, well then it's definitely a no.

RESP 4: Yeah.

RESP 1: People should know that.

RESP 3: Yeah.

RESP 1: And sometimes it's taken advantage of.

RESP 3: Yeah, so, a verbal response isn't necessarily always exact. It doesn't convey exactly what's going on.

RESP 1: You know, if she's too drunk to say yes that doesn't mean it's a yes. (F4)

Findings: Consent to Sex

RESP 2: ...I suppose **feeling comfortable** enough to be able to say no is probably, in a way, you know, if you're comfortable enough with the person that you feel **you could say no if you wanted**, at any time. That's...I think...

RESP 1: Yeah. I suppose the whole idea of like **proper consent would be asking and giving a yes or no answer**. But like, **in practice, that must hardly ever happen** because that's just...

RESP 4: Yeah.

RESP 1: ...such a **mood killer**.

RESP 2: Yeah, a **buzz kill**, yeah, I was just going to say. (F2)

Findings: Scenario 1

- **Hook up scenario where two people move from being acquaintances to sexual relationship following a night out**
- Fred had sex with Jane but she had a blackout and cannot remember it the next morning
- We found that an individual might still be attributed some responsibility, despite having a blackout – i.e. even if the behaviour cannot be remembered later

Findings: Scenario 1

- Perhaps Fred is an ‘okay guy’ who believed she was ‘up for it’, got carried away due to male sex drive disinhibited by alcohol – he behaved unethically but not feasible to call this rape (Story A)
- Fred took advantage of Jane while she was passed out, lied that she was a willing participant (Story B)
- Story A fits within the progression toward sex script – Fred acting out of character

Findings: Scenario 1

INT: Okay. So what do you think that Fred will think when he thinks back on the situation? So how will he explain his behaviour?

RESP 5: It depends **what type of a guy he is.**

TWO RESPONDENTS: Yeah.

RESP 1: Em...I'd say he was just like a **normal boy**...like, it's just like...

RESP 3: It **depends on how drunk he was** as well.

... RESP 5: **He may have not seen...though that she was that drunk.**

Especially if...

... RESP 2: Well he had the **cop on to use a condom.**

RESP 3: That is true.

RESP 2: Which **says a lot about his morals** because most blokes wouldn't bother if she was completely unconscious, you know? He had the...

... RESP 2: Yeah. **They don't think about those things I think ... when they're horny.** (F3)

Findings: Scenario 2

- **Dan drinking all day with friends, unable to get with a woman at the nightclub. He is helpful toward Isobel, who requires assistance getting home, but then sexually assaults her**
- Decision points: Dan could have chosen to behave differently at a number of points
- Conclusion: Dan has a bad character, it recalls the rape myth – stranger, uses force, takes advantage of vulnerable woman more drunk than he is
- Alcohol as an explanation, not an excuse
- Strong condemnation – ‘scumbag’, ‘predator’, ‘disgust’

Findings: Scenario 2

Scenario 2 perceived as more clear-cut than Scenario 1 – Yet Isobel thought unlikely to report the assault:

RESP 2: I think, kind of, Irish culture would like, you only go to the Gardaí in a ... really serious situation

RESP 5: ...a last resort.

... RESP 8: And I guess, unfortunately, you might be ... very...potentially would be like **embarrassed** to go to the guards about something like that like.

... RESP 5: Well you'd wonder **would the guards take it serious** like ... when you were drunk. ... "You're a mess. Go home." ... I don't mean that in a bad way but like...

SEVERAL RESPONDENTS: Yeah, yeah.

... RESP 8: **You would be afraid of that attitude** like.

RESP 5: Yeah, **even if you weren't met with that** like, is that a fear that you'd have?

RESP 8: Yeah. (M2)

Findings: Scenario 3

- **Claire and Jim are members of the same friendship group. She pressures him to have sex with her**
- It was acknowledged that it is plausible for a man to be pressured into sex, but the interpretive script was not as available as for other Scenarios
- Assumption that Jim's peers will not be sympathetic – 'why didn't you leave', nothing to complain about, 'get over it'
- Attention attracted by explaining Jim: He must have a weak personality and / or have distinguishing characteristics (e.g., religiosity, social conservative)

Findings: Scenario 3

- Event labeling: ‘goaded’ ‘unfortunate’, ‘unethical’, i.e. typically not sexual assault
- Scenario did not fit the rape script – they knew each other, had some level of intimacy earlier
- Jim missed the decision points – Why didn’t he leave the bedroom, why did he leave the company of friends, why didn’t he call out for help, why did he choose to engage in sex
- Seen both as the agentic male – responsible for sex because he did it – and a weak man who allowed himself to be pressured

Findings: Scenario 4

- **Ben forces Michelle to give him oral sex**
- Placed within the rape myth by participants – use of force, premeditation by topping up her drinks
- Discussion of this as rape or sexual assault
- Why did Michelle feel uncertain about naming it?
Main answers: They were in a relationship; She was drunk when it occurred; She did not say ‘no’; Oral rather than vaginal sex; Her youth and inexperience
- Why did Ben behave like this? Reprehensible character; Male sex drive; Drinking contributes to not thinking through his options
- Alcohol as an explanation rather than an excuse

Findings: Scenario 4

RESP 6: **Sexual assault** straight ahead like. You don't force a girl's head down. ... The fact that he **forced** her head down, **pushed** her head down, like you don't even...like, **you don't do that** to your girlfriend. ... Well, not to any girl. It's sexual assault.

RESP 1: Yeah.

RESP 2: Nah, **but** how many times have you been there kissing a woman and then you like, **touch** the head...

RESP 6: **Never.**

RESP 2: ... and then they go down, you know what I mean like? You **touch** the head, you know, when they're going down.

RESP 4: **That's different. That is different.** (M1)

Findings: Scenario 4

RESP 3: But it's...but it's the fine line of **defining rape** again because there was **nothing done to her physically** like.

RESP 4: But at the same time **she couldn't get away** if he had her head.

... RESP 3: Yes, yes, yes I...yeah, I'm not saying that ... again, how do you...

RESP 2: What is rape?

RESP 3: ...define what rape is?

RESP 2: Yeah.

RESP 3: It's because something was done to me, it was **an invasion to me**...

RESP 2: I think that's why I said ... **rapey as opposed to rape**, you know?

It's kind of like

RESP 1: ... I would say that is an **invasion**...

RESP 5: Yeah, I think it is too.

RESP 1: ...because there's **something going into her body**. It just doesn't happen to be ... the other end like. Eh...yeah ... we keep coming back to this difficulty with defining rape. (F2)

Discussion of Findings

- **Non-Consenting Sexual Activity was Unacceptable**
- **However, Consent is a Grey Area:**
 - Consenting process is tacit, not transparent
 - Anticipating little discourse about intercourse
 - Uncertainty about legal meaning of rape and sexual assault
 - Considerable doubts raised about reporting to the Gardaí, if victim had been drinking
 - Non-consent considered in light of expectations for gender roles and alcohol use

Discussion of Findings

- **The Rape Myth**
- Two of the scenarios appeared to fit the Rape Myth:
 - Male, stranger, using force, premeditation
 - Dan and Ben did not have penetrative sex with their victims
- One of the remaining scenarios was normalised:
 - Fred did not appear to fit the rapist stereotype
 - Risk of unwanted sex during blackout seen as partly the woman's responsibility
 - There is a high rate of blackout among regular binge drinkers: **80%** (McCaffrey et al., 2014)
- The other scenario was viewed as an outlier:
 - Claire seen as a 'freak', Jim as a weak man

Discussion of Findings

- **Doubts about Reporting, Lack of Preparedness**
- Confusion over the legal definition of rape and sexual assault
- Information gaps concerning reporting process and supports available to victims from Gardaí
- Information gap in knowledge about non-statutory support services
- Frightening prospect of having credibility questioned, being quizzed about choices and behaviours

Discussion of Findings

- **Alcohol and Consent**
- Assumed that drunk sex is common, that alcohol is relied on in hook ups and in relationships
- From desirable **loss of inhibition** to frightening **loss of control**:
 - Males lose ability to self-regulate sex drive as a result of cognitive impairment
 - Females lose ability to refuse male-led progression toward sex through cognitive impairment
 - Perceived loss of credibility in reporting sexual assault or rape, if the victim was drunk at the time
 - Woman perceived as having capacity to give consent, even when drunk to point of blackout

Study Recommendations

1. Improve preparedness for negotiating consent in real-world scenarios – at second and third levels
2. Employ novel, empowering means to engage adolescents and young adults
3. Consider a decision point, skill-based approach for assessing and managing problematic consent situations
4. Promote understanding of alcohol as a source of risk and harm
 - Harms to self and others
 - Binge drinking
 - Protective behavioural strategies
5. Improve attitudes to reporting and support seeking